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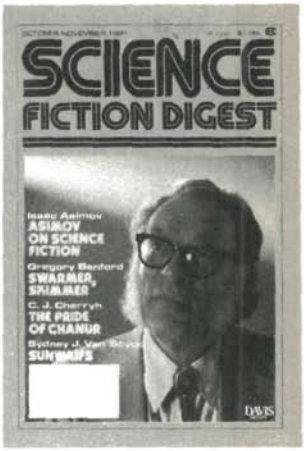


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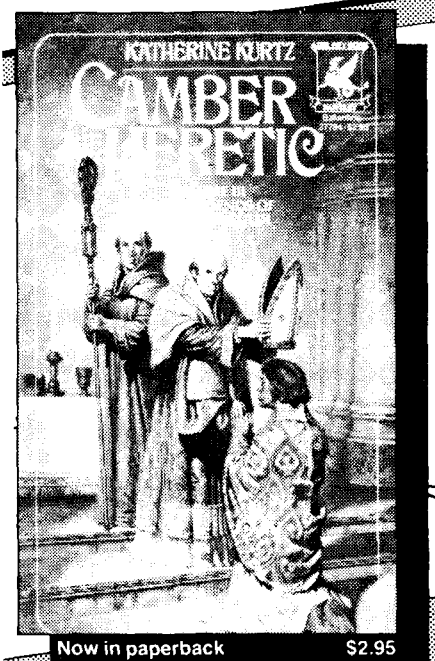


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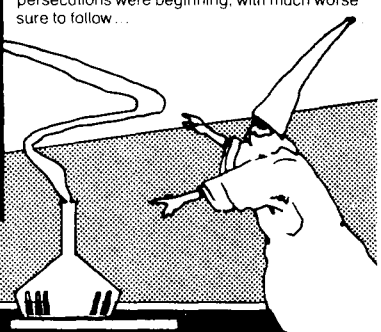

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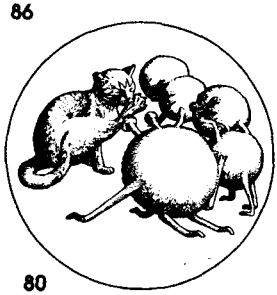

80

68


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **COVER, "The Loom of Thessaly"** | Wayne D. Barlowe |
| 6 | **EDITORIAL: WATCH OUT!** | Isaac Asimov |
| 14 | **ON BOOKS** | Baird Searles |
| 20 | **With Thimbles, With Forks and Hope** | Kate Wilhelm |
| 66 | **Luke Warm at Forty Below** | Martin Gardner |
| 67 | **THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR** | Erwin S. Strauss |
| 68 | **Waiting for the Morning Bird** | John M. Ford |
| 80 | **Without (General) Issue** | Reg Bretnor |
| 86 | **The Dark Light Girl** | Alan Dean Foster |
| 102 | **Improbable Bestiary:** | |
| | **The Martian** | F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre |
| 104 | **Mud/Aurora** | D. D. Storm |
| 124 | **The Loom of Thessaly** | David Brin |
| 167 | **LETTERS** | |



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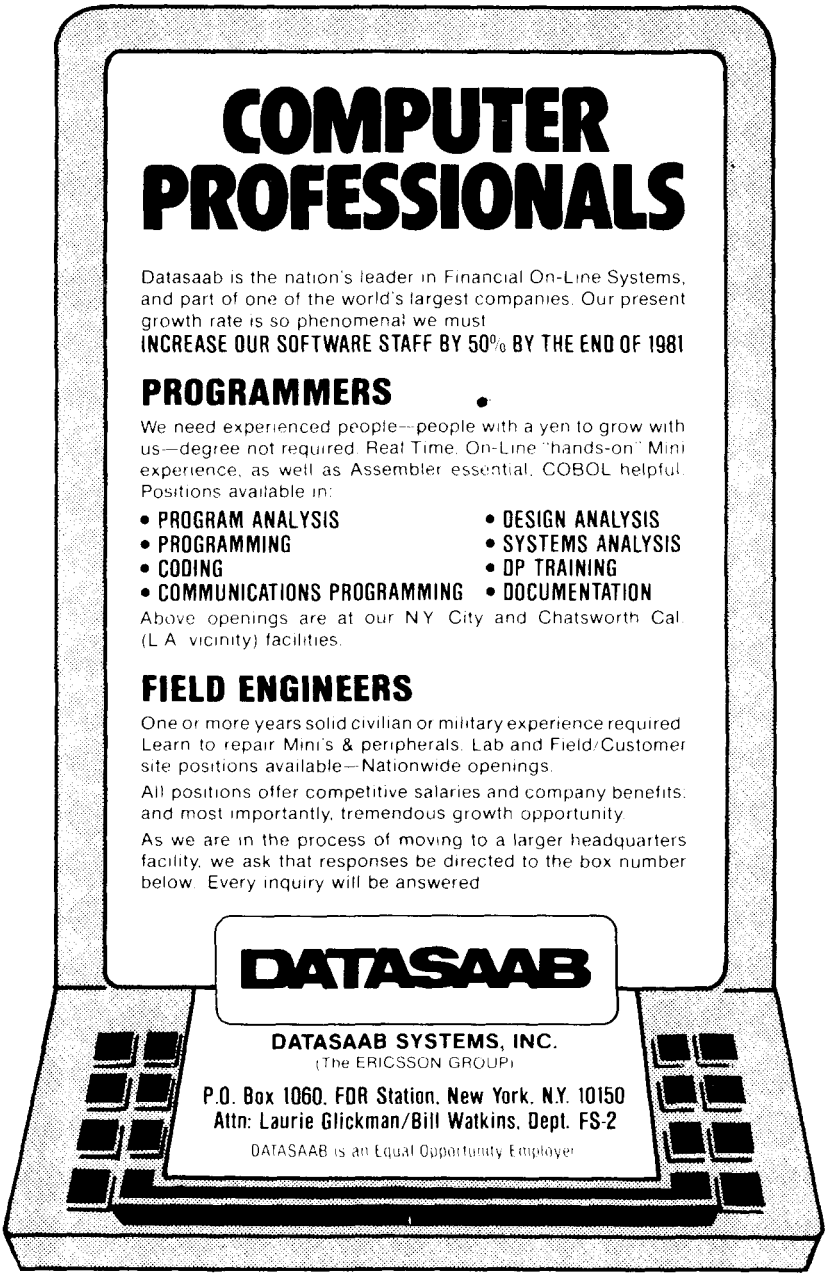

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# EDITORIAL: WATCH OUT!

**by Isaac Asimov**

**art: Frank Kelly Freas**

A few issues back I mentioned, in an editorial, that a woman had cancelled her subscription because I was a "humanist." I was rather amused at that. I was wrong, for there was nothing amusing in it at all. Let me explain why.

There is something in this world we call "modern science." It isn't terribly modern anymore since it is something like 400 years old. Nevertheless, that is young compared to the number of years in which humanity has indulged in mythology or art or trade or agriculture or any of myriads of different human activities. Modern science is an intellectual baby in comparison.

And it's *our* baby. It's the particular enthusiasm of science fiction. The word is in the very name of our field, and science fiction is inconceivable without science.

The science-fiction writer doesn't have to immerse himself in science when engaging in his profession; he doesn't even have to mention it very much. Nor does he have to approve of every aspect of the social consequences of science or, for that matter, of *any* of them. He can be savagely satirical about science and depict a future in which the Earth is badly damaged or utterly destroyed through the agency of science.

What he cannot do, however, is to pretend that science is erroneous in basis, that scientific conclusions are worthless, that the scientific method is invalid. If he does, his writings become fantasy.

And is there anyone who casts doubt upon the validity of science? Perhaps the usefulness or desirability of science may be in dispute, but surely not its validity.

Not so. There exists in the world a species of thinkers (if I may use that particular noun in this connection) who call themselves "scientific creationists" and who insist on accepting the literal words of the Bible.

For tactical reasons, they don't mention the Bible in their official



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statements, since that would make their teachings religious in nature and keep it out of the schools.

Nevertheless, they believe that the Earth is, at most, only 10,000 years old. They deny the validity of evolutionary doctrine and insist that the various species of living things were separately brought into existence by a "creator." They are careful not to name the "creator," but does anyone suppose they mean Brahma, Zeus, or Marduk?

They have no evidence for these claims, but rely for their arguments on the denial of the validity of scientific findings they don't like and on the distortion of those scientific findings they think offer them some faint hope of support.

Covering themselves with the tattered and dirty rags of denial and distortion and calling it "science," they then proceed to attack real scientists. They set up something they call "secular humanism" and define it as a religion. They claim that the concept of evolution is a "religious dogma" of secular humanism.

Note the peculiarity of this. We have a group of religious fundamentalists who can find no worse label for the people they denounce than "religion."

What do they hope to gain by this bit of semantic upside-downism—scientists as "religious" and themselves as "scientific"?

First, they arrogate to themselves pretensions to logic and reason they do not possess. Second, they make evolution (or, by similar mislabelling, anything else they decide they don't like) into something far worse than scientific error: they make it into a religious heresy.

How convenient!

A scientific error must be established as erroneous in the marketplace of science, through the laborious task of competing observations and experiments, through debate and discussion, even through arguments and polemics.

A religious heresy, on the other hand, can be summarily put down by the full power of the state and church, and I need not tell you of the kinds of methods used in the past to enforce orthodoxy in the name of an all-merciful God.

Am I going too far? Am I exaggerating?

*Right now,* the "scientific creationists" are moving Heaven and Earth to get various state legislatures to pass laws requiring their doctrines to be taught in classes whenever evolution is taught. They are calling in the power of the state *right now* to decide, by legislation, what is scientifically correct. And one state, Arkansas, has already passed such legislation.



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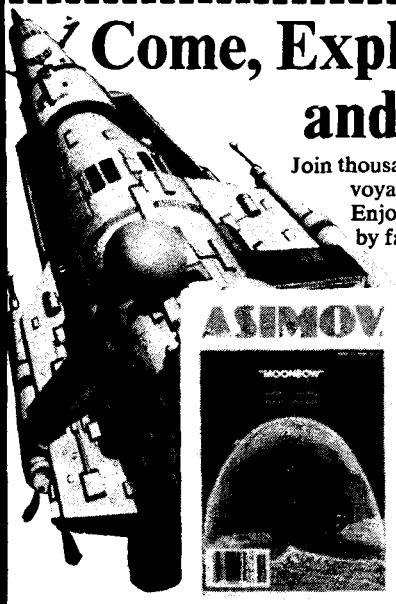


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Does it matter that in one rural state, or possibly a few more, a handful of legislators, terrified of losing their jobs, are willing to enforce ignorance on the children of the land? It matters not only in itself, but in the precedent it sets. Could not the same legislators also insist that "scientific storkism" be taught as one theory of childbirth, and that "scientific SantaClausism" be taught as one theory of gift-giving? Why not? The level of science would be no lower.

Or perhaps you think that schools ought, after all, to teach all varieties of theories concerning matters in dispute? That this is only being open-minded and fair? Don't you think then that *all* creation myths ought to be taught, including those believed by hundreds of millions of Hindus, Buddhists, and Animists?

Do you think that "scientific creationists" are only after a fair shake? That all they want is an equal hearing?

Can you imagine any of these Bible-wavers consenting to teach evolutionary doctrine in their churches in the name of an equal hearing? —Never!

So where's the fairness?

In the churches, they threaten the kids with eternal damnation in the roasting fires of Hell, if they believe anything but what they are there taught. In the homes, adults—already brain-washed—

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reinforce it, and so do almost all aspects of society.

The schools are the *only* place where evolution is as much as mentioned; and even there, vigilante groups of "scientific creationists" in many parts of the nation terrify the teachers into mentioning evolution only in a whisper, or not at all.

What "scientific creationists" want is the destruction of modern science, and if they win, destruction is what will follow. You cannot have any rational geology or astronomy if the Earth is viewed as only 10,000 years old; you cannot have any rational biology if evolution is squashed as heresy.

Nor can you suppose that children who are kept from science in grade school and high school will see the light in college. Even if colleges remain intellectually free, children who reach college age without having been introduced to the scientific way of thought will by then never truly learn it. They will have been intellectually ruined.

And what do you think will happen to the United States if it becomes scientifically illiterate in a scientific age, while other nations maintain scientific expertise? —Guess!

Do you think that faith in God will save us from decline and destruction? The "scientific creationists" don't think so, for one and all of them believe in a strong and overwhelming national defense. Martin Luther thought God to be a mighty fortress; but to the "scientific creationists", it takes God *plus* a mighty fortress to be a mighty fortress.

But why am I bothering you with all this in an editorial in a science-fiction magazine?

Well, can you recall any science-fiction stories that don't assume a Universe billions of years old, that don't take evolution for granted, that don't suppose scientific findings to be essentially correct, that don't extrapolate into further scientific findings that make some sort of sense in the basic structure of the Universe as we believe it to be?

Do you suppose that "scientific creationists" would be willing to allow such arrant sources of heresy as science-fiction magazines to remain untouched? And even if they do, do you suppose that science fiction can survive if schoolchildren are taught, one and all, that the only legitimate source of truth rests in the literal words of the Bible and that any speculation beyond that will douse them in the undying flames?

Theodore Sturgeon once said that science fiction was the last bastion of free speech. His view was that when people as stupid as



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censors (and who else but stupid people would be willing to be censors) are driven into finally detecting heresy in something as outré as science fiction they will by then have detected it everywhere else.

So when the legions of ignorance begin putting pressure on a science-fiction magazine because its editorial director believes in evolution—watch out!

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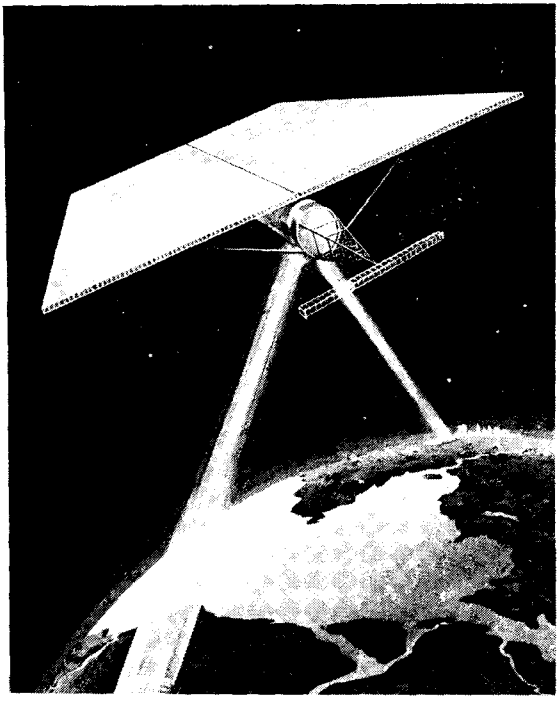

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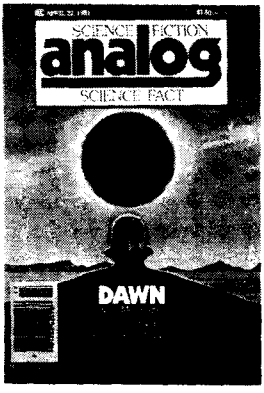


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*The Atlas of Middle-Earth* by Karen Wynn Fonstad, Houghton Mifflin, $14.95.
*Catastrophes!* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh, Fawcett, $2.50 (paper).

A messy double fortnight, this, with a bunch of books that infuriatingly make no pattern. The more than interesting ones are of less than recent vintage, so the emphasis will be on what are technically reprints, but which have been so thoroughly unavailable for so long that they may as well be new.

But just to stick to form and the customary procedure, the new ones first. . . .

There seems to be a minitrend in SF these days toward the Oriental, the Japanese in particular. I would guess from his name that Somtow Sucharitkul is not Japanese, but his first novel, *Starship and Haiku*, is very much involved in that culture, as is obvious from the title. (The *haiku* is a Japanese verse form, always of three unrhymed lines and exactly 17 syllables.)

It takes place in another of those dreary near futures. Civilization has been for the most part wiped out in the Millennial War, so named because it took place in the year 2000. There is still a fair amount of survival in the ruins, and even some technology keeps going, mainly in Japan, whose culture has withstood destruction better than any other. (Highly likely when you think about it; the social organization that won them the last peace would certainly win them the next.)



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However, that culture has become necrocentric; always concerned with death and its ritual forms anyhow, it is plagued by waves of ritual suicide, often encouraged by its leaders, one of whom, a central character, goes so far as to set up a sort of amusement park specializing in various ornate ways of doing away with one's self.

We follow the adventures of a second-generation American of Japanese ancestry, raised in the rubble of Hawaii and bribing his way to Japan with a perfect piece of pottery left him by his grandmother. With him is his brother, a mutant mute, supposedly feeble-minded (needless to say, he has Powers). The third major figure is an aristocratic Japanese girl; she is chosen by the remaining whales to be the first human with whom they will communicate. It seems that they have not objected to their decimation by humans because their culture, too, is death-oriented; the Japanese, in fact, are their descendants, due to circumstances much too complicated to explain here. There are a fair amount of *haiku* sprinkled through the novel; the starship of the title is a Russian one, left over in orbit. It is the on-and-off goal of Japan and the main characters to take off in it on a millennia-long voyage to seed humanity among the stars.

I, for one, am a bit weary of the wave of dismal, post-holocaust futures we've been faced with over the past decade; as those things go, this one has the advantage of the originality of the Japanese flavor and, to a lesser degree, the whales. I say lesser degree because, while heaven knows the concept is an original one, it verges too perilously close to a sort of mushy mysticism for me to think of it as a totally positive factor.

My other major complaint with *Starship and Haiku* is in the execution. The writing, particularly the dialogue, has the quality of badly translated subtitles in a foreign-language movie. This may be deliberate stylization on the author's part to impart something of the Mysterious East; for me, it just came across as awkward.

I'm sorry to say this is not the end of my teriyaki beefing. To hand also is a fantasy novel, *Tomoe Gozen*, by Jessica Amanda Salmonson. The lady of the title is a female samurai; we are told of her exploits against the sorcerer Huan of the celestial Kingdoms of Ho and other assorted menaces, in an alternate world in which the mythology of Japan and its magic are reality.

There are two problems with this novel. The first cannot be laid at the author's door; she seems to know her Japanese lore well. But to be effective as the basis for a fantasy novel, a body of myth must be fairly close to home, to have been a *lingua franca* absorbed with the rest of our culture very early. That's why we respond to the



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overtones of works using Celtic, Norse or Greek mythology, because we know the ramifications of the stories used. But we simply don't respond to more exotic, alien mythologies because those overtones aren't there, and too often fantasies based on Oriental myths become as disjointed and unreal as the myths themselves.

That's one problem with *Tomoe Gozen;* the other is, again, execution. And that's an apt word for what the author does to language. Style has not been a strong point in SF and fantasy over the years, and not everyone can be a Wolfe, but there is a limit. And it is passed with such sentences as "[The monster] champed and frothed and had so huge a manner of confidence that Tomoe was given pause, though she would not give up ground." And " 'I cannot go on,' she cried, and cried tears." I couldn't have agreed more, but true to the critic's creed, plowed on. Things did not get appreciably better; readers who have no truck with style, and crave swordplay in bizarre settings, may enjoy it.

I am not so naïve that I thought the stories in Poul Anderson's *The Psychotechnic League* were recent, but I was astonished when I saw in the acknowledgements just how old they are; they are all from the 1950s, the three longest ones from the early '50s. To the best of my knowledge, they haven't been available for some time; but they hold up awfully well, good examples of the intrigue-and-action SF that was so prevalent then.

The first and shortest of the tales is set in, you guessed it, a dreary near future (as a matter of fact, a near past—there is a graceful alternate future intro to account for atomic war in 1958); it's barely more than an incidental mood piece. But "Un-Man," "The Sensitive Man," and "The Big Rain" are all long enough to sink your teeth into, recounting the trials and tribulations of various heroic types with mutant powers in setting up the Psychotechnic League which grows out of a sort of U.N. Secret Service. "The Big Rain" is a particularly engrossing look at the mining colonies on Venus as they are achieving political and economic independence.

There is something amusing about the two matters, both in "Un-Man," that clued me in to its age before I checked the date. One is that the hero is obviously a clone, but nowhere in the story is that word used. And the characters smoke a lot of cigarettes, which is really *declassé* these days.

*The Shrouded Planet,* by Robert Randall (who is really Robert Silverberg and Randall Garrett), is also from the 1950s. It consists



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of three novelettes made into a novel by the addition of some linking material, a form very common in SF which harks back to the days when the magazine was King; though these Robert Randall stories are well-remembered, they curiously enough have not seen book publication for two decades, and that was in hardcover from a specialty press. It is now a collector's item.

The Shrouded Planet stories are less action-oriented than Anderson's; they are more concerned with social speculation, another major element of the SF of that period. The Shrouded Planet is Nidor, a cloud-wrapped world inhabited by furry humanoids who worship the Great Light, their obscured sun.

To Nidor come men from Earth, who interfere with the single culture of the planet, but only in the most beneficent ways. The culture has been stagnant for thousands of years; the humans provide change very subtly, the core of which is a school.

What makes these stories unusual is that they are told from the native point of view; the reader is left on his own to speculate on the Terran's motives and methods. A new generation of readers brought up on the generally misanthropic SF of the past decade (Le Guin's *The Word For World Is Forest* is a prime example) might have some problems here.

In any case, we do follow several generations of a Nidorian family as they cope with an ecological crisis (mind you, this was written long before ecology was chic), then a second crisis brought on by the solution to the first, and finally, a culminating situation which results in a revolutionary change in the culture's social structure.

Even if you find hard to take the idea of humans meddling with an indigenous culture altruistically, and doing it well, it makes for good, intelligent reading. There is a final novel—*The Dawning Light*—in the series; I hope it sees print soon.

So far as I know, Joseph O'Neill's *Land Under England* has not been reprinted here in the U.S. since its initial hardcover publication in the mid-1930s. I was happy to see it in print again; I'd never read it, but I delight in most of those "Lost World" type stories that were so popular before World War II opened up so much of the globe that there was no place to stick a forgotten civilization even if you had one handy.

*Land Under England* starts very promisingly indeed. The Julians, an aristocratic English family, have a curious tradition that male members of the family have, once a generation or so, descended through mysterious (and now lost) caverns to a strange world un-



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derground. Just after World War I, the last Julian determines to find the lost entrance, supposedly connected somehow with a Roman wall in the area, to go in search of his father, who had disappeared.

He finds the vast caverns, rife with strange flora and fauna, that lead down to a sunless sea. I would guess that O'Neill has read his Hodgson; I was reminded here strongly of the epic trek down the Great Slope in *The Night Land*. That's OK, though; there are worse things to be influenced by.

On the sea, he discovers the inhabitants, and allows himself to be captured and taken to their city, where he meets "the Master of Knowledge," who explains their culture in tedious detail. This to my chagrin, because I had the horrid realization that where I was expecting a rollicking adventure story, what was I given? Social significance!

Without going into the dreadful details, the zombie-like inhabitants of the underground are the victims of a metaphor for Communism or Fascism; this was written during the heyday of the fear of the "Bolshevik menace" and Hitler.

Now I'm not totally against social significance; it can result in wonderful SF (particularly from the British, as with Wells and Stapledon). But all too often, some mainstream type decides that SF is a dandy vehicle for his allegorical, satirical handling of the message he wants to get across, and that the culture of the larva people of Venus's tenth satellite (these things are usually not long on scientific accuracy) is perfect for his allegorical, satirical view of the Reagan administration. And the allegory and satire are so thick that the vehicle is overloaded and any science fictional values are nonexistent.

*Land Under England* is nowhere near this awful, but the meaningful content does indeed get in the way of the story, and that is unfortunate for those of us to whom the story must come first.

A couple of years ago, I said that I wish the publishers would stop with the Tolkien spin-off material, already. Which has more or less happened, thank God. But there are a couple of new developments and a couple of new items of interest to the legion of Tolkien fans and collectors, of whom I'm one.

The publisher of the paperback edition of the trilogy has done a new one, plus *The Hobbit*, with new cover art. It's by Darryl Sweet, and it's not my idea of the Tolkienesque. Gwaihir Wind-lord is depicted about the size of a helicopter (you'll never get *me* up in one of those things), Aragorn has the cutest helmet with what looks like



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a red bow on it, and the hobbits are grotesque. Sweet *has* captured the afternoon light of the scene at the crossroads beautifully, though.

There is also a new hardcover edition of the trilogy, honoring the silver anniversary of its publication. It's the same plates for the inside, but there are new bindings, handsomely done in red, black, and silver.

The two new items are two atlases of Middle Earth, coincidentally published at almost the same time. Barbara Strachey's *Journeys of Frodo* is an oversized paperback; Karen Wynn Fonstad's *The Atlas of Middle Earth* is a hardcover.

The former is the simpler production; it deals only with *The Lord of the Rings*. There are 50 maps, neatly and efficiently done, in chronological order. The scales vary, but there is a consistent grid using Hobbiton as 0; the routes of the various characters are marked in red, with a date for each major event on the way. It's a neat little book.

*The Atlas of Middle Earth* is a good deal more elaborate. It covers all the chronicles of Middle-Earth; there are "maps" as small-scaled as building plans, or covering great areas for each age or themes, such as language, population, etc. There is an enormous amount of information given, too, from a diagram of the evolution of the languages of Middle-Earth to tables of the lengths of mountain ranges and rivers. It's a true atlas (the author is a geographer) and quite an achievement.

I reread *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* recently (I must needs schedule rereadings at great intervals now to prevent overfamiliarity) and journeyed along with Bilbo and the Fellowship with these two books. It was great fun.

Finally, an announcement of newly published works by those connected with this publication: this time it's *Catastrophes!*, edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh.

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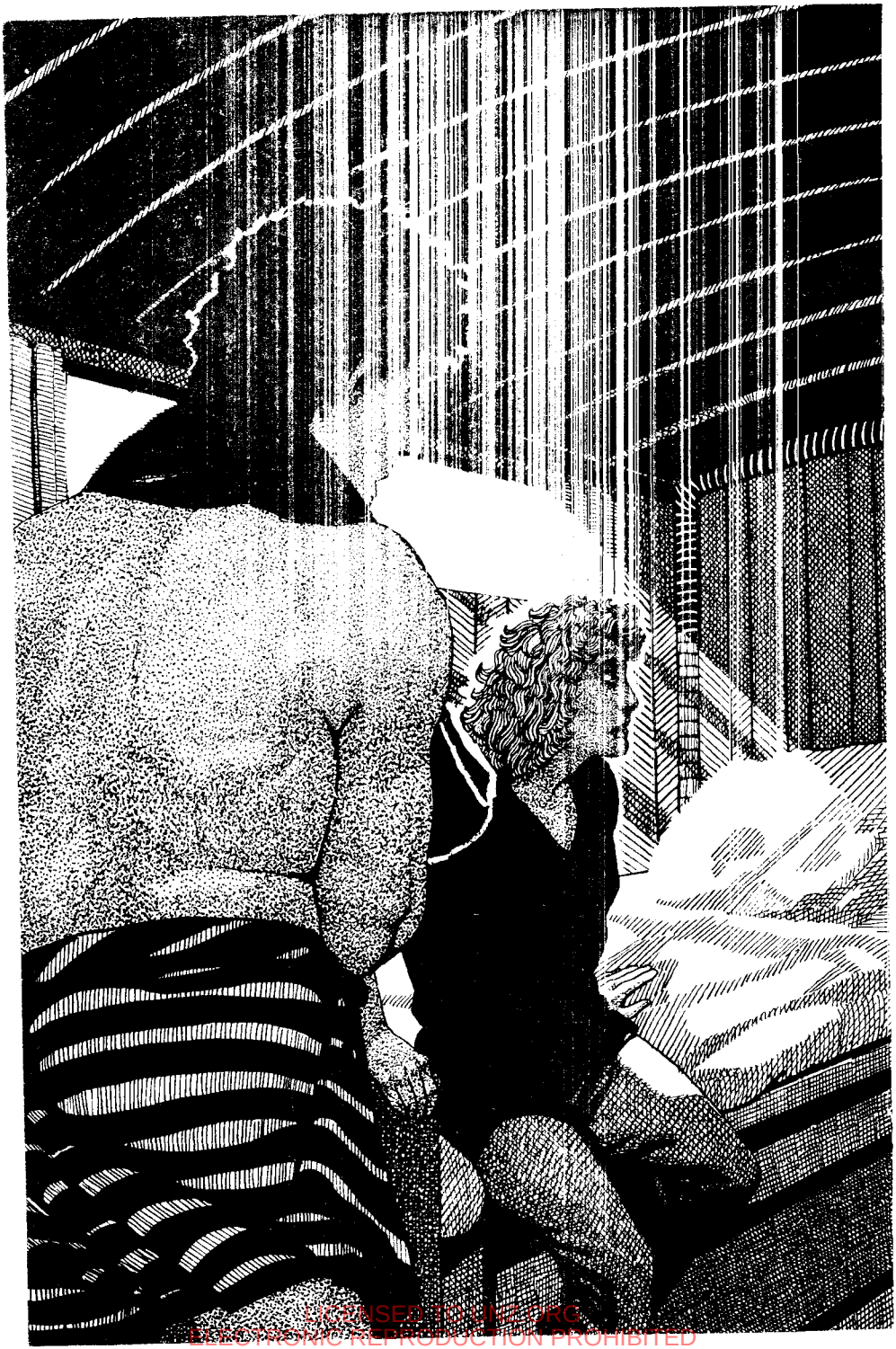

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# WITH THIMBLES, WITH FORKS AND HOPE

by Kate Wilhelm

art: Janet Aulisio

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*Kate Wilhelm sold her first story in 1956; and by the late 1960s she had clearly arrived as a major talent, with the stories in her collections* The Downstairs Room *(1958) and* The Abyss *(1971). She won a Nebula award for* "The Planners" *in 1968. Her major novels include* Let the Fire Fall *(1969);* Margaret and I *(1971);* Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, *a Jupiter and Hugo Award winner (1976);* The Clewiston Test *(1976); and, most recently,* A Sense of Shadow *(1981). Together with her husband, Damon Knight, she teaches SF writing every year at the Clarion workshops.*

". . . beware of the day,
If your Snark be a Boojum! For then
You will softly and suddenly vanish away,
And never be met with again!"

"They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope; . . ."

*The Hunting of the Snark*
—Lewis Carroll

## I.

The farm house glowed in the late afternoon dusk, like an old-fashioned Christmas-card scene. Low evergreens crowded the front porch, the sidewalk from the drive curved gracefully; it was all scrubbed looking, the white clapboard freshened by rain that had started to fall. Charlie felt a twinge of guilt at the cleanliness and the comfort of it after spending most of the day in New York. He parked in the garage and entered a small side porch that led into the back of the house. The porch was a catch-all for the bottles to be returned to the store, newspapers destined for a recycle center,

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some wooden seed flats that had got only that far on their way to the barn, an overflowing woodbox. When the clutter got so bad that he could no longer make his way through it, he cleaned it all up, but not until then, and he never had finished cleaning everything—the seed flats had been there since June.

Inside the house the fragrance of soup was tantalizing; there were the odors of wood fires, of onions, of cats—three of them—cedar paneling, and other things he had not been able to identify, left-over things from when the house was built, or from the first seventy years of its occupancy.

"Hello," he called out, but he knew Constance was out. The house felt empty when she was outside. Two of the three cats stalked over to sniff his shoes and legs, checking credentials before they accepted him. The third one, Brutus, glared at him from on top the upright freezer. It was Charlie's fault, obviously, that the rain had started again. Brutus turned his back and faced the wall.

Charlie went through a narrow hallway, through the utility room, all the time dancing to avoid squashing a cat. He heard the soft plop Brutus made when he left the freezer, and he knew the evil old tiger cat was following along, his tail rigid, daring either of the other two to get in his way. They would keep an eye on him and scamper if he got near. Brutus was a New York cat; he had not, would never approve of country life. In the kitchen there was a copper-colored electric range with a stove-top grill, a dishwasher, a disposal that had never been used since they had moved in—meat scraps went to cats, and everything else went on the compost; there were rows of hanging pots and pans, all gleaming copper-bottomed, seldom used. What was used every day for nine or even ten months of the year was a forty-year-old wood cookstove. On it now there was the iron kettle with soup simmering so low that a bubble broke the surface once every five minutes or so.

The orange cat rubbed against him and complained about things generally. He rubbed its ears for a moment, then said softly, "She's going to be mad as hell, Candy." Brutus swiped at the gray cat, Ashcan, in passing and settled himself on the rocking chair nearest the stove. His eyes gleamed yellow as he narrowed them in the way that made him look Mephistophelian. Candy went on detailing her awful day, Ashcan licked the place where Brutus had nabbed him, and Charlie tried to think of a way to break the news to his wife that he had practically taken on a job for them both. She would be mad as hell, he said again under his breath, and he put down the briefcase filled with reports that he planned to read that night, and



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have her read.

On the slope overlooking the house and yard Constance was on her knees planting daffodils under the half-dozen apple trees that made their orchard. Next year they should start bearing. God-damned rain, she muttered, had to do it now, couldn't wait another fifteen minutes, had to be right now. Rain trickled down her neck, icy fingers that made her skin flinch, trying to turn itself inside out. She plunged the bulb planter into the yielding earth, twisted it viciously, lifted out the plug and laid it down. With one hand she scooped up wood ashes and bone meal and sand and tossed the mixture into the hole, with the other she groped in her pail for another bulb and dropped it in, no longer taking the trouble to put it right side up. She returned the column of dirt topped with newly cut grass and jabbed at the ground a scant six inches away to repeat the process. It was impossible now for her to summon the vision of apple trees in bloom on a golden carpet.

She had heard the car and knew that Charlie was home. She had known when Charlie left that morning that when he got home he would hem and haw around for awhile and finally blurt out that he had taken the job, that it would be a milk run, nothing to do, nothing dangerous, etc., etc. Her stomach would churn and her blood would chill, making her fingers cold, and she would nod silently and try to find words that would tell him she hated it, but she was willing for him to do it because she knew he couldn't just quit the business cold turkey. She knew that now and then he would go see Phil Stearns and come home to tell her that he had agreed to do just this one job, this one last time.

But it wasn't fair, she muttered. For twenty-five years Charlie had worked on the New York City police force, and he had come out scarred but intact, and it wasn't fair to risk everything again.

The worst scars were the ones that could not be seen. Invisible scar tissue had formed, protecting him where he had been hurt too often. In the beginning he had been possessed by zeal, a sense of mission, holy justice; over the years that had become cynicism and simple dedication to sharpening his skills of detection. Then he had become different again, had developed a cold fury because nothing changed, or if there were changes, they were for the worse. His rage at the criminal began to extend to the victim. Constance had known then it was time for him to get out. Surprisingly, he had agreed, and three years ago, at forty-seven, he had retired.

She looked with dismay at the pail: at least twenty more bulbs.



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The rain was coming down harder; there was a touch of ice in it. Her fingers were red and swollen-looking and her nose had started to run and she couldn't wipe it without smearing mud across her face. "It isn't fair!" she cried, looking at the house.

By the time she finished the job and put away her equipment, the rain was a downpour and the day was finished with the gray sky lowering to the ground. Charlie met her at the back door and drew her inside, pushed her gently into a chair and brushed a kiss across her nose as he leaned over and pulled off her muddy boots. He helped her out of the sodden jacket and then took both her hands and pulled her across the kitchen through the hallway to the bathroom that was steamy and sweet smelling from bubblebath.

She sighed and did not tell him she would have preferred a shower in order to wash her hair also. Since her fingers were stiff with cold he ended up undressing her and then held her elbow firmly until she was in the tub, only her flushed face and wet hair above water.

Charlie was perplexed about the hair; she was not the image he had anticipated, with mud on her cheek, and her hair dripping and clinging to her cheeks and her forehead.

"Be right back," he said and left, taking her wet clothes with him.

As soon as he had vanished, she stood up and pulled a towel from the rack and tied up her hair. It was silly for Charlie to baby her; she was taller than he was, and almost as broad. Her face was wide, Slavic, her eyes pale blue, her hair almost white it was so blond. The gray that was already showing here and there blended in and no one but Charlie knew she was turning. She knew she neither looked nor acted like the kind of woman a man would baby. She sank back into the suds and thought again it was silly for him to go through this to ease his conscience, but she was glad he did. Sometimes he babied her, sometimes she babied him, it worked out.

He came back carrying a tray with two frosted martini glasses, the shaker, a plate of garlic salami, the kind you could get only in a good New York deli, and strips of cheese. He sat down cross-legged on the floor so that his eyes and hers were level, poured the drinks, handed her a towel and then her drink, and began to tell her about the job. While he talked he ate the salami, and held out pieces for her to bite.

Constance watched him and listened and she thought: he was night to her day, all dark and brooding and secret. His hair was a mop of tight black curls, his eyebrows so heavy they made his face look out of proportion. There was a gleam of gold in his mouth when he laughed, one gold cap. His teeth were crooked, an orthodontist's



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nightmare, but they were the whitest teeth Constance had ever seen.

"Lou Bramley," Charlie said, eating cheese, "will be fifty-one November first. That's Saturday. He's got a wife that he cares for, two good kids, treasurer of Tyler and Sacks, Incorporated, no debts, everything going for him. And Phil's sure as sin that he's going to suicide before the end of the day Saturday. And leave him, Phil, holding a five hundred thousand dollar insurance policy."

"So why doesn't he just not issue the policy?"

"Because it's too big to piss away without more than an itch to go by. And nothing's come up. He's had his best working on it for the last three weeks and they haven't come up with anything. No motive. No problem. No woman. Nothing."

"Why does Bramley say he wants that kind of insurance?"

"His story was that at a party a screwball astrologer told him the next six months are the most dangerous of his life, that unless he takes extreme care the odds are good that he will be killed in an accident." Charlie poured the last of the martinis and laughed. "Phil even hired an astrologer to do a horoscope for Bramley. Nothing to it. He's riding a high wave, nothing but good things ahead. Can you imagine Phil going to an astrologer?"

Constance laughed. They had known Phil Stearns since Charlie's college days. Phil believed in nothing but actuarial tables. "Charlie," she said then, "it's an impasse. In time a good psychologist or psychiatrist could give Phil his answers, but if his people couldn't find anything in three weeks, what does he think you can do in three days? He has to gamble, or cut loose."

Charlie nodded. "I more or less told him the same thing. Midnight Friday the policy goes through automatically if he doesn't reject it. By midnight Saturday we both think Mr. Lou Bramley will no longer be with us, and Mrs. Bramley will come into a sizeable fortune. Phil is ready to cut him loose, but he wants a back-up opinion from a good psychologist. From you."

She shook her head. "I'm retired. And you are too, if you'd just remember it from time to time."

"Bramley's gone down to a flossy resort in Florida, in the Fort Myers area. That raises the possibility of a vanishing act instead of suicide. In either case it has to go down on the books as accidental death for the big payoff. All Phil wants you to do is go down there and observe him, talk to him, and on Friday give Phil a call. He needs something more than an itch to refuse a policy like that."

Constance glared at him. "You can't take jobs for me. I'm not an indentured servant or something."



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"I didn't tell him anything definite," Charlie said reproachfully. "I did say that if we agreed, we'd want a week's vacation at the flossy resort after we finished this little job. On Phil, of course."

She shook her head. "Go stir the soup or something."

As soon as he was gone, she opened the drain, pulled the towel from her hair and turned on the shower. She hated bubble bath; this was a gift from their daughter. Of course, Charlie would be hooked on Lou Bramley; they were the same age. He would never admit it, but the idea of stopping everything now when there was so much to do, time enough finally to do it, that would frighten him. He was not a coward, he had survived too many encounters with near death, and had gone back too many times, but he was cautious. He was not ready. His own unreadiness would make it impossible for him to sidestep Lou Bramley who evidently was ready. Charlie would have to know why. He would have to stop him if he was stoppable.

Constance had called Charlie late in the afternoon of her first day at the luxurious hotel. She had managed to talk briefly with Lou Bramley, she reported. "He's withdrawing, Charlie," she had said soberly. "Anyone with half an eye could spot it. He's not eating, not sleeping, doesn't finish sentences. He stares and stares without moving, and then jumps up and walks furiously on the beach. Nervous energy. He's so obsessed he doesn't even realize he's got two women pursuing him."

"Two? What do you mean?"

And she had told him about the woman who was openly stalking Lou Bramley. The bellboys and waiters were betting on when she would land him, it was so obvious.

Charlie did not like having a woman appear. It was possible they planned to skip out together.

He was going to like it even less, she thought. The woman was June Oliveira, from Brazil, and Lou Bramley was the first man she had paid any attention to in the week she had been in the hotel. Wherever Lou Bramley went, she was so close that she might as well have been attached to him. Constance had watched her sit at a table next to his, and start edging her chair toward him. When she got within whispering distance, he apparently had become aware of her for the first time, and he had moved out to a beach chair in the sun. His action had been almost absent-minded. The woman had continued to watch him intently, and moments later when he jumped up and started to walk, she had followed.

It would have been easy to miss, Constance knew. The terrace



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was usually a busy place, especially during the late afternoon happy hour. Waiters were rushing back and forth, groups forming, breaking up, reforming. If she had not been watching closely, she might not have noticed, partly because the woman was so brazen about it; somehow that screened her intentions even more than secrecy would have done. When she first mentioned the woman to Charlie, Constance had realized she could not describe her beyond the most obvious features—long black hair and slender figure. Her face was smooth and unreadable, expressionless; she wore no jewelry, no make-up, no nail polish. Probably she was in her thirties; she was too self-assured to be younger, but there were no visible signs that she was older.

Up to this point Charlie would be willing to accept her assurance that Lou Bramley and the woman were strangers. And then she would tell him that last evening the woman had moved to a room next to Bramley.

The bellboy who was willing to sell information had rolled his eyes when he told her that. Later last night Constance had gone for a walk, and in the shadows of a seagrape bush, she had stopped and looked back at the hotel, studying it until she found her own room, counting up and over from it to Bramley's. On the balcony next to his, she had made out the dim figure of the woman as close to the joint rail as she could get.

Constance remembered the chill that had shaken her, and she felt it edging up her arms now. She looked at her watch; he should be home, she decided, and dialed the number.

Charlie sounded pleased; he was running down a good lead, he said, but the woman continued to worry him. She could be a complication, he admitted.

"I'll see if I can get anything from Bramley about her," Constance said. "I'm having a drink with him in a few minutes. I doubt that we'll be able to talk, though. That woman will be in his lap practically. Charlie, she . . . she really bothers me."

"Okay. Keep your distance from her. Don't get in her way. She's probably got her own little racket going. Just watch the gazebo from a distance. Right?"

She agreed, and in a few minutes they hung up. She had not thought of the gazebo for a long time, but this didn't feel at all like that. There was something strange and mysterious going on, but she felt no danger; this was not the way she had felt when she had made the workmen move the little structure—hardly bigger than a playhouse. Nine years ago when they were in the country on



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weekends and part of the summer only, she had looked out the kitchen window one Saturday morning and had felt her skin crawl. She had to move the gazebo, she had said to herself sharply, and without another thought she had gone to the phone and called Willard Orme and had told him to bring someone out to do it. He had protested and tried to arrange a date a week away and she had said she would get someone else to do it and remodel the house and build the garage and all the rest of the work he was figuring on doing for them. Reluctantly he had come out and moved the gazebo. That afternoon Jessica and two friends had been sitting in it drinking cokes and eating hot dogs when a storm had blown down the walnut tree near the barn, and it had fallen on the newly bared spot of earth.

This was nothing like that, she told herself sharply. It was time to go down and meet Lou Bramley, see if they could find a place where she could get him to talk a little, a place where there would not be room for June Oliveira to be at his elbow.

The terrace was very large, and even though there were forty or more people on it, many tables were vacant. The hotel was between seasons now; after Thanksgiving, through spring, it would be jammed and then it would be impossible to wander out and find a table. She sat down, and shook her head at the waiter. She would order when Lou Bramley joined her. She spotted him as soon as he walked from the lobby through the wide doors. He hesitated, looking around, then nodded and started for her table. He had taken perhaps ten steps when he paused, looked past her, and changed his direction to go through the terrace, out to the beach chairs in the sand, where he sat down next to June Oliveira.

"For heaven's sake," Constance muttered to herself. "He's falling for her line." Bramley was facing the gulf, away from her. June Oliveira was at his left, talking to his profile. Constance watched them for several minutes and then decided not to let Oliveira get away with it so easily. She picked up her purse and put on her sunglasses; it was still very bright out on the sand. She hated going out in the sun because her nose was burned, her cheeks, her chin. She walked across the terrace, and down the three steps, turned toward them, and then veered away and headed toward the beach instead. She began to feel the heat of the sun on her nose and cheeks, and abruptly she turned and went back, without glancing at Lou Bramley and June Oliveira.

In her room again she began to shiver and started to adjust the air conditioner, but she had turned it off when she arrived and it



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had not been on since. She went to the balcony to let the late afternoon sun warm her. She realized that she was cursing under her breath and suddenly she laughed. A tug of war over a man! She had not played games like that since her teens. Now she began to look over the people on the sand below. Finally she found Lou Bramley and June Oliveira, exactly as before. She stood thinking and then went back inside and dialed Charlie again.

"I just want you to call her, and keep her on the line a few minutes."

He didn't like it, he said many times, until she said she would hire a bellboy to do it, and if she paid him ten, that woman would more than likely pay fifteen to learn the identity of the hoaxer.

"And if you get him out of her clutches, then what?"

"I'm going to try to get him drunk enough to sleep tonight. If he doesn't, he just might go through with it, no matter what you tell him. He's desperate for sleep."

Charlie grumbled some more, but he would make the call to Oliveira in five minutes. "Honey," he said before hanging up, "just be damned careful."

Lou Bramley sat in the afternoon sun with June Oliveira and on her balcony Constance shivered. It was crazy, she told herself sternly, there were fifty people down there, and that many more on the beach, dozens of people swimming, or sunbathing. It was a mob scene down there.

Almost thirteen years ago Charlie had given her a present of one year of defense classes. He had insisted over her protests, saying further that as soon as Jessica was ten, he was going to enroll her also. Months later she had come home one afternoon upset and unwilling to continue. "Charlie, what Kim is teaching us now are lethal blows. I don't like it."

He had held her shoulders and regarded her soberly. "If anyone ever lays a hand on you, hurts you, you'd better kill him. Because if you don't, I will. You'll get off with self defense, but it will be murder for me." They both knew he meant it.

What her classes had not prepared her to do, she thought decisively, was to stay in her den and shiver when she had agreed to do a job. She waited in the dark, cool bar for the bellboy to summon June Oliveira for her urgent long-distance call. The bar adjoined the terrace; it had ceiling-to-floor smoked glass windows that let the patrons see out and kept those on the outside from seeing in.

The day the walnut tree fell was the day that Jessica had given up junk food, had in fact become a health food fanatic. The girls had



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come running in talking shrilly, caught up in a nervous reaction to the storm and the crash of the tree, and the realization that they could so easily have been under it. Jessica had stopped at the door and looked at her mother across the kitchen. There had been beads of sweat on her upper lip. Wordlessly she had crossed the room and hugged Constance very hard, shaking, saying nothing. Strange, Constance thought as she watched, how memories like that one pop up, complete, every detail there, as if it were a little scene one could raise the curtain on at any time. She was glad she had been with her daughter on the day she learned how short the distance was between life and death.

Presently June Oliveira appeared, walking fast toward the lobby. Constance left the bar through the terrace door and went straight to Lou Bramley. The woman had left her scarf on the chair; she did not intend to be delayed very long.

"Hi," Constance said. "Want to take a walk?"

Bramley jumped up and looked around swiftly. "I certainly do. Let's go."

They started for the beach, then he stopped. "It's no good. She'll just tag along."

"I've got a rental car in the lot," Constance said, taking his arm. "Let's go somewhere else to walk."

They went to a flagstone path that wound between the swimming pool area and the tennis courts, up past the terrace, to the street-front parking lot. Not until they were on the busy highway heading south did Lou Bramley relax.

"I really wanted to talk to you professionally, but I'm not quite sure of the etiquette of the situation. And I owe you an apology," he said. "I'm sorry."

Constance laughed. "I'm retired. Any advice I give these days is just that, advice, like you might get from sweet old Aunt Maud."

She glanced at him as she spoke; his mouth twisted in an attempt to smile, then settled back into a tight line. His sunglasses were mirrors that completely hid his eyes. She turned her attention once more to the road. Incredibly busy, she thought, didn't those people know there was a gas shortage? Probably many of them were on their way down to the Tamiami Trail, through the swamps over to the east coast.

A straggly line of pelicans flew across the road; she admired pelicans more than all the other birds. They were scruffy-looking on land, ungainly, comical, but in flight they were supreme. So little effort seemed to go into it. They just opened their wings and sailed.



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"I came down here to think through a problem," Lou Bramley said after the silence had stretched out long enough to be almost unbreakable. "A business problem," he added quickly. He turned his head away, as if afraid that even with most of his face hidden behind the sunglasses, he might reveal too much. "Lucky, my wife, says that we constantly signal to each other, all people, and that we learn to read the signals as kids and get sharper at it as we grow up. She says that women don't make passes at me because I'm not signalling that I'd be receptive." He paused, waiting for her response.

"That's really very good," Constance said dutifully.

"Yes. And now especially, with this problem, I know I'm not hunting. So why is it that I can't turn around without having that woman at my side? Earlier, I wanted to have a talk with you and I went to her instead. I don't even like her. I actively dislike her, more than anyone I've met in a long time. And I can't stay away from her."

"I wonder what she wants," Constance said.

"That's the stumbling block for me too. There must be some kind of con game that she's going to pull when the time's right."

"She isn't right for a con artist, too blatant, too uncaring about appearances." She spied a good place to leave the highway at a small restaurant with beach access. "Finally, we can take our walk."

They walked on the hard-packed wet sand at the edge of the water. Lime green waves rose knee high before they lost themselves in froth. Flocks of sandpipers probed the sand, scattered at their approach, settled again as soon as they passed. Now and then a large white heron fluttered up out of their way, or a bunch of sea gulls screeched at them. Constance did not push the conversation or try to direct it as he talked about the woman, June Oliveira. She got little from it; he was not a good observer, not an attentive listener, not at this time in his life anyway.

They turned back as the sun was setting in a gaudy display of reds, golds, ivory, green. . . . Offshore, a large yacht was moving south. They watched it.

"I don't swim," Lou Bramley said suddenly.

"My husband doesn't swim very well," Constance said. "He paddles a little."

"I saw you heading straight out into the gulf this morning; it gave me a sinking feeling in my stomach when I realized I couldn't see you any longer."

"I don't think June Oliveira swims either," Constance said. "At least I haven't seen her doing it."

"She thinks it's dangerous. She doesn't do anything dangerous.



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She thinks people are crazy who do."

He did not break the silence again until they were drawing near the tiny restaurant. "Would you like to have dinner here? I understand almost all the seafood restaurants are pretty good."

They got a booth by a window and she ordered a martini; they watched the end of the gaudy sunset while they waited for it.

"What happened after you published your articles?" he asked. He had not ordered a drink, and watched her sip her martini with poorly concealed desire for one just like it.

He was punishing himself, she thought, making himself live through every minute of this week without help of any sort. The hollows under his eyes were alarming.

"I had already quit the hospital when I began to write the articles," she said. "They brought a little pressure on the university. I had tenure and they couldn't have touched me, but it was uncomfortable. I finished the semester and dropped that too. It wasn't as if I sacrificed anything," she added easily. "I was busier than ever doing consulting."

"They made it look like a continuation of the old battle between the psychologists who aren't doctors, and the psychiatrists who are," he said thoughtfully.

She shrugged. "A plague on both their houses. I'm researching a book right now that will damn the psychologists just as much as those articles damned the holy psychiatrists."

"I'd like to see that," he said almost regretfully, and his eyes went distant as his fingers began to tap on the table top. He was back in his own hell.

"It's heady stuff," she said, "taking an opponent that much bigger than you are." His gaze remained fixed. She pulled the menu close to the candle and tried to make out the faint print.

When the waiter came to take their orders she asked to see the wine list and was disappointed by the selection. She did the best she could with it and said firmly, two glasses. Lou Bramley started to protest, then became silent again. For the first time he seemed to be uncomfortable with the silence.

"I'm surprised that they're still treating so many people with electroshock," he said.

"Several hundred thousand a year. For a while they thought they had a better solution with psychodrugs, but what happened was they ended up with addicts. Mostly women."

"And the difference in the treatments for men and women. That was shocking too."



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"Shocking," she agreed. "That's the word."

Suddenly he smiled, the first time. "I'm not very good company. I'm sorry. Thanks for rescuing me, though. I'm glad we got out, away from that woman."

He ate little, but he drank the wine, and she kept refilling his glass; when the bottle was low, she signalled the waiter who immediately brought a new one. The food was delicious. She was sorry he had not eaten.

They both ordered Key lime pie and while they waited for it, he said, "I really wanted to talk to you about a favor. You mentioned that your husband is joining you this weekend and you'll be around next week?"

She nodded.

He leaned back as the waiter came with their pie. For a minute Constance was afraid he would reconsider and withdraw again, but as soon as the waiter left, he went on.

"I thought I might miss you tomorrow. I have an important call I have to wait for in my room, and I thought you might have plans to go out. Anyway, that woman has made me jumpy, and I don't want to leave anything in my room. For all I know she might find a key somewhere, let herself in." He tried to laugh to show that he did not really mean it, but the effort was wasted. "It's something I want kept safe for me. I'm going deep-sea fishing, but I mentioned that already, didn't I?"

He knew he had not. The lie evidently made his mouth dry; he had to drink some of the awful water before he could continue. Constance was missing nothing: his sudden thirst, the way his fingers tightened and relaxed, tightened again, the way he avoided her gaze. He was still too dry to go on and he reached for the wine this time.

Constance took a bite of the pie and drew in a deep breath. It was sinfully good, made with real whipped cream, real lime juice.

"I don't want to leave confidential papers in the hotel safe," Lou Bramley said finally. "I know they have to turn things over to the police in case of accident or anything," he said in a rush.

He stopped again and this time Constance thought he would not go on. "This has to do with your business problem?"

"Yes. That's it. I would like to know that someone responsible has the papers, just in case."

"I'll be glad to hold anything for you."

"Thanks. And if, I mean there's always a chance that something could happen, and if it does, would you just drop the stuff in a mail



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box for me? There will be two envelopes ready to mail. Inside a larger envelope."

She nodded.

"I can't tell you how that relieves my mind," he said. "I know it must sound crazy, but I've got a hunch that I should make sure that stuff is safe." He put his fork down and looked past her out the window and instantly his face was set in that distant look she had come to know.

"I believe very much in hunches," she said. "I used to wonder why everyone in my profession paid so little attention to intuitions, hunches, things that we all experience and no one wants to talk about. Some of those patients committed to years of institutional life, ordeals of drugs, shock treatments, hours of psychodrama, group therapies, the works are there because they couldn't bring themselves to ignore their intuitions. They got out of control. Others, even sicker people on the outside, pretend there are no such things. There has to be a middle ground, there has to be a handle to it, a way to look into it without being labeled crazy. I haven't found it yet," she admitted. "But I'm convinced that you can't treat neurotics, psychotics, psychopaths, any of them unless you admit that part of the psyche is still uncharted, unknown, and powerful."

She had brought him back; he was regarding her with interest.

"They'll crucify you," he said softly.

"They might try. I'm hammering my nails as hard and fast as they are hammering theirs."

He smiled with her.

She made a waving motion. "Enough of that. Why is your wife nicknamed Lucky?"

It was a silly story—her father had won a daily double the day she was born—but it started Lou Bramley talking. It was all about his wife and two children now, the trips they had taken, the strange and wonderful things the children had done. Nothing current, nothing about the future, nothing more recent than a couple of years ago. When he paused, she told a story about Jessica, or about Charlie.

They were the only customers still in the restaurant when it closed. He was yawning widely. At the car he stopped and looked back at the small dining room, the beach beyond it pale under a new moon. He nodded, then got in.

It was shortly after twelve when they walked into the hotel lobby and saw June Oliveira studying travel folders near the desk. Lou Bramley groaned.

"Jesus Christ!" he muttered. "She's just waiting. She knows and



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she's waiting."

On Friday Charlie arrived at the hotel at six-thirty and went straight up to their room where Constance was waiting for him. He kissed her fervently.

"You had me worried," he said then, holding her at arm's length, studying her. "Have you looked at your nose?"

She had; it was as shiny and red as a plum tomato. It was also hot.

"You know what he's running away from?"

"I think so. He needs to confirm it, I don't have a stitch of proof."

"If he doesn't, we have to kidnap him or something. We can't let him go through with it, Charlie. I like him, he doesn't deserve that."

"And I like his wife a bunch too. We'll see. Now, what about that mystery woman?"

"I wish I knew. Look, Bramley hasn't left his room all day. He's waiting for that phone call. He was supposed to get a package to me for safe keeping, and he hasn't done that either. It's that woman. She's got some kind of control over him. I know, I know . . . ."

Charlie watched her pace to the window, back. He had seen her like this before, but not for a very long time. He tried to pull her to the sofa next to him; she was too restless to sit down.

"Charlie, you'll have to get him out of here to talk to him. Tell him he's insured. Tell him you have to have something to eat, say in the coffee shop, that he has to sign papers and can do it there. She'll follow. In the lobby I'll distract her and that's when you have to get him out. There's a place down the road, south, Jake's Fish House. I'll meet you there. You rented a car, didn't you?"

"Yes. You told me to, remember? Constance, what is all this? You're nearly hysterical, you know?"

"I'm not hysterical, but there isn't much time. There's an eleven o'clock flight out of Miami and I want him on it. Charlie, he won't talk here! That woman is hanging out on his elbow. Believe me."

He kissed her again and went to the door. "Okay. Jake's Fish House. It'd better be good, sweetie, real good."

He would have recognized Lou Bramley from the photographs, but they had not prepared him for the muddy color of his face. He had blanched when Charlie said he represented the insurance company.

"You have the policy, Mr. Bramley," Charlie said. "There are some formalities, of course, a few things to sign."

Bramley sank into a chair, staring at him blankly; very slowly



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the mud color changed to a reddish suntan. He moistened his lips. "Something to sign?"

"Yeah. Would you mind going to the coffee shop? I got a lousy headache on that flight down here. Cup of coffee, and a couple aspirins, that's what I need. We can get the paperwork done there."

Bramley nodded and stood up. He went to a chest, opened a drawer, and withdrew a manila envelope. "I have to drop this off at the desk," he said looking at the envelope.

The woman was standing at the elevators when they arrived. The Dragon Lady, Charlie thought, and nodded to her. At his side Lou Bramley had gone stiff. He looked straight ahead as if he had not seen the woman at all. No one spoke.

She got off before them, but was walking so slowly that they passed her within a few feet of the recessed elevator bank. They went to the desk where Bramley handed over his envelope and watched until the clerk deposited it in the box. He took a deep breath.

"The coffee shop's over there," he said dully, turning from the desk.

The woman was less than fifteen feet away. Constance appeared and walked between them and when the woman stepped aside, Constance brushed against her.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Constance yelled. "She had her hand in my purse!"

June Oliveira started to move away faster; Constance caught her by the arm and turned her around. "I know you did! I saw you and I felt the tug on my purse. It's happened to me before, just like that."

"Let's get the hell out of here," Charlie said, taking Bramley's arm. There was no need to tug; Bramley was already nearly running for the wide entrance doors.

In Jake's Fish House they took a booth and Charlie ordered, "One scotch on the rocks," he said pointing to Bramley. "One very dry martini for me."

"Your wife said that's your drink," he said easily.

"You saw my wife? Why?"

"Routine."

"You told her about the policy?"

"Nope. Told her I was a headhunter scouting you out for a new job."

"She believed that?"

"She sure was trying hard to believe it. She showed me your computer. Neat. Real neat."



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Bramley ran his hand over his lips. "Who are you?"

"Actually, I really am doing a bit of headhunting for Jim Hammond."

Bramley looked as if he might faint. The waiter brought their drinks and Charlie said, "Drink up." He sipped his martini and knew he wanted another one very fast. Bramley drank most of his scotch without pausing. They regarded each other. Bramley looked haunted, or maybe treed. Charlie had seen that look on other faces. Sometimes if the person with that look had a gun, he began shooting. If he was on a ledge, he usually jumped.

"If you've done what we think you've done," he said softly, "Jim Hammond wants to hire you, starting now, tonight, or next week, next month, whenever you can arrange it."

"He doesn't even know. No one knows."

"Five hundred thousand dollars' worth for openers," Charlie said.

"For openers," Bramley said. He finished his scotch.

"Hammond wants you, you can work it out together. You found a glitch in his fool-proof gadget. You could even say he needs you." He signalled the waiter to repeat the first round and then leaned back watching Bramley. "Of course, it was the dumbest thing you could do, get a policy like that and take off, I mean. Like a neon announcement."

"I never claimed to be smart. I was desperate. It would have worked. Lucky would have paid the money back and would have collected fifty thousand from Hammond. His offer is still good, isn't it? The reward for anyone who cracked his system? I wrote out exactly what I did to prove . . . Oh, my God!"

"Now what?"

"I've got to retrieve that envelope from the hotel desk!" He shook his head, then asked, "How did you find out?"

"The old Sherlock Holmes method. If it's all that's left, it's got to be it. Or something like that. We couldn't find anything on you, so I looked up your company. Two years ago they got a new Hammond computer system. I read about the guarantee and the reward. As soon as I saw that computer setup at your house, I knew."

Their new drinks had arrived before Constance showed up. She came straight to their booth and sat down next to Charlie. Bramley looked completely bewildered by her arrival.

"It's okay," Charlie said to Constance, putting his arm about her shoulders and squeezing slightly. "You put on a good show. How did you get out of it?"

"I apologized and explained many times that I had been robbed



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in New York by someone who casually brushed against me. She was not happy."

"You two . . . ? You're with him?"

"This is my husband," Constance said. "I have your envelope. I suppose you want it back?" She took it from her purse and slid it across the table.

He looked from her to the envelope, back to her. "You've been working these past couple of days?"

She nodded. "I had planned to kidnap you and make you see how unfair you were being, if Charlie hadn't pulled it off."

"It's too easy to make judgments from the outside," Bramley said. "It would have ruined her life, too."

"And what about the load of guilt you were planning to dump on her? Wouldn't that have ruined her life? Ruin, despair, humiliation, those were your burdens, but you know she would have shared them. Who would have shared her guilt?"

"She would have grieved, but she would have accepted that."

"She already knows," Charlie said. "I don't know how, but she does."

"Just as I'd know," Constance said.

"She would have tried to stop me if she suspected," Bramley whispered.

"Maybe she feels she can take the guilt trip better than you could stand the humiliation and ruin from whatever you did. Maybe she wanted to save you from suffering," Constance said coolly.

"Stop it!" His voice broke and he gulped his drink. "You've made the point," he said.

"Lou, there's an eleven o'clock flight out of Miami for New York. You can take my rental car and turn it in for me at Miami. You have a reservation for that flight."

"This feels like a bum's rush," he said, but his eyes gleamed, and there was a look on his face that she had not seen there: boyish, eager.

"The hotel knows you're going out fishing tonight, they won't think anything of it when you don't come back. Call them from New York tomorrow."

He was nodding. "I really don't have to go back there. I could drive over in a couple, three hours. What time is it?"

"Seven thirty."

"I'd better get started."

"I got some sandwiches, and a thermos of coffee. They're on the front seat. Here's the agreement for the car, and the key." Constance



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handed them to him.

He folded the paper and stuffed it in his pocket and brought out another slip of paper. He looked at it, then let it fall to the table. "My receipt for the fishing trip. Paid in full." Now he stood up. He looked down at Constance. "I don't know yet what I think about you. I owe you a lot. Thanks." Suddenly he leaned down and kissed her forehead. He reached across her to shake Charlie's hand. "You don't really have anything for me to sign. That was all done a month ago. Right?"

"Right. Good luck, Lou. Hammond's waiting for your call." He hesitated, then asked, "Fill me in on one thing, before you go. What do you think the Oliveira woman was up to?"

"I think she knew I was going to die and she was hanging around to watch," he said without hesitation. "She'll be disappointed. Keep out of her way," he added, looking at Constance. "She's a ghoul, probably crazy, and I think she's very dangerous."

They watched him leave, then Charlie turned to Constance.

"Okay. What was that all about? He's right, it was the bum's rush. Why?"

"I don't think he would have been able to leave again if he had gone back to the hotel. I don't know how or why but that woman does have some kind of power over him. I think he's right, Charlie. She knew. That's what she was waiting for."

Charlie took a deep breath, blew it out again in exasperation. "Tell me," he said.

When she kept it all very objective, as she did now, Constance knew there was nothing frightening about the woman. She repelled and fascinated Lou Bramley, nothing too unusual there; except, she told herself, both she and Lou Bramley knew it was more than that, even if neither of them could ever demonstrate it.

"Now, you tell me. What did he do? He's not a crook."

"Not in the usual sense anyway. His company got a big multi-million-dollar computer system two years ago, guaranteed safe against illicit access. And Bramley couldn't resist trying to break into it. It was a game, puzzle solving. And he did it. Eighteen months ago he got his own computer at home, and it's been like having a mouse in the cheese cupboard ever since. God knows how much money he's diverted, where it is. Hammond, the computer company president, wants to hire him." He shrugged. "I think I got out of the crime business at a good time. I just don't understand things any more. Hammond said half a dozen companies would hire him if he actually got access to that computer. And I guess he did."



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Hours later when Charlie fished for his keys, he felt the receipt for the charter boat and brought it out also. "Let's do it," he said. "Let's go fishing."

"He's going to take off at high tide, at three or a little after," she said. She thought of the glassy water of the gulf. "We have to sleep aboard if we're going." They began to hurry, like children rushing to a picnic.

For a moment or two Constance was aware of another feeling, the same one she had felt years ago when she had looked out her kitchen window that Saturday morning. The same, but intensified, and also directionless.

"You know," Charlie said, driving, "this is something I've wanted to do all my life. Never thought the chance would drop into my lap like this. Freezing rain was falling when I left the city. . . . "

Beside him Constance was caught up in his infectious gaiety; she pushed the intrusive feeling of dread and fear out of her mind.

## II.

At the docks she and Charlie went into an all-night diner to ask directions, and they met Dino Skaggs there, one of the brothers who owned *Dinah's Way*. He was a wiry brown man with sun-bleached hair, his face so wrinkled it was hard to guess his age, which Constance thought was about thirty-five, give or take a few years.

Dino scowled when Charlie showed him the receipt. "You sure he isn't coming?" he asked suspiciously, studying the receipt.

"I'm sure," Charlie said. "Look, if there's an additional charge because there's two of us, we'll pay it."

Dino bit his lip as he studied Charlie, then Constance. "Shit," he said finally. "Hundred per head, in advance. We shove off at three. No checks," he added as Charlie pulled out his checkbook.

"I have cash," Constance said. She counted out two hundred and handed it to Dino, who recounted it.

He stood with the money in his hand, still frowning glumly. "Shit, I guess you won't be eating all that much." He peeled off five tens and thrust the bills back to her. "Don't bother to come aboard until two-thirty, and keep it quiet when you do. We've got a sleeping passenger aboard already." He slouched away.

"Well," Constance said. "You're sure about this?"

"Shit yes," Charlie said grinning. "Want some coffee?"

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Dino met them on the dock where the *Dinah's Way* was moored. It was too dark to tell much about the boat, except that it looked small, and very pretty, sparkling white with blue letters, blue trim, gleaming copper rails. It looked less like a fishing boat than Charlie had anticipated.

"You'll want to watch the lights and all, I guess," Dino said morosely. "I'm going to settle you in the stern and you stay put. When you've had enough, you go on to your stateroom. And no talking in the galley. Inside your room with the door closed it's okay, just keep it low. Right?"

Charlie said, "Aye, aye," and Dino groaned. Constance felt a stab of impatience with Charlie. He was too eager, too willing to let this pipsqueak boss him around.

"I'll take her out from up on the flybridge," Dino went on. He led them aboard, and to the rear. The boat rocked gently. "Grandstand seats," Dino said, pointing to two fighting chairs. "Back through here," he said, motioning them to come to the cabin, "you go down the stairs, and turn right at the bottom. There's a yellow light over the door, that's your room. Light switch on the wall. Head at the far end. Bathroom," he added, glancing at Constance. "You'd better take your seats. I'll see you in the morning." He waved to a man who was leaning against a piling and vanished around the side of the boat.

Constance leaned toward Charlie. "What's a flybridge?"

"I don't know."

They sat back in their chairs and watched the gleaming black water laced with ladders and bridges and arcs of lights. The engines started up and Charlie found Constance's hand and held it; lights came on above and around them, running lights, Charlie thought with self-satisfaction, and then they were moving easily, backing away from the dock, out into the bay. Here and there other boats were moving, small boats with lights hardly above the water line, larger fishing boats, a yacht that made everything else look toylike. Charlie sighed with contentment.

When they finally went to bed, after all the lights had disappeared in the distance, they shared one of the bunks. Sometime during the night Charlie moved to the other one and fell asleep instantly again.

He woke up first and was amazed to find that it was nearly eight. The motion of the boat was very gentle, nothing like he had imagined. He had never been on a boat before, except for a rowboat when



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he was a kid. He thought of the seascapes he had admired, always stormy, threatening. Another time, he decided, and was glad that today the gulf was like a pond, the boat's motion hardly noticeable. As soon as he got up and started toward the head, he realized the motion had been effectively concealed while he had been horizontal. He held to the bunk and groped for the door. He had just finished showering when he heard Constance scream.

He flung open the shower door and stopped. Standing in the open doorway to the galley stood June Oliveira staring at Constance.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Why didn't you tell us she was aboard?" Charlie snapped.

They were in the galley where Dino was making breakfast. June Oliveira had gone forward, he told them.

"I don't recall that you asked me," Dino said, breaking eggs, his back to them.

"We have to go back," Constance said.

Now Dino turned. "Lady, get this one thing straight. This is my boat. I'm the skipper. I say when we come out and when we go in. I made a contract with Mr. Bramley, all signed, paid for, everything. You and your husband said you wanted to use that contract. That means we do it my way. And that means we fish until this afternoon. I pick up my brother Petie, and then we go back. That's in the contract, and I'm following it to the letter. You don't want to fish, fine. You can look at scenery. I'll fish."

"When did she come aboard?" Charlie asked, his voice easy now, his working voice, Constance thought.

"Last night. I was checking things out and there she came. What's this? What's that? I'm going, too, you know. I'm his guest, you know. He wants to pretend it isn't planned, so just don't say anything to him, so he won't have to lie about it. That's her story. How was I to know anything?"

Charlie nodded in sympathy. "I've seen her operate. But you could have mentioned it to us," he added reasonably.

"Yeah. I should have. I was afraid you wouldn't want to go, and I sure as hell didn't want to go out alone with her. She's . . . I don't know. Anyway, I had to go out to pick up Petie, and I'm sticking to the original schedule. Now let's eat." He motioned toward the table where there was a coffee pot. "Help yourselves."

The galley was sparkling with copper fixtures, everything so compact and well planned that in an area hardly more than five feet square there was a two-burner stove, a refrigerator, sink, cabinets.



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The table and a right-angled bench could seat half a dozen people. Behind it there was a wall separating off another stateroom, and beyond that the pilot's cabin. The boat was moving slowly, on automatic pilot while Dino did the galley chores.

Charlie began to wonder how much it all cost. Opposite the galley was what Dino called the saloon, with three chairs and a bench-sofa and coffee table. The walls were mellow, rich paneling. Teak? Mahogany? It looked expensive.

Dino served up ham and scrambled eggs and fluffy cinnamon rolls.

"Are you going to call her?" Charlie asked.

"She said she'd have coffee a little later. I think she's mad as hell." He looked at Constance, who was eating nothing, just drinking the coffee. "Look, I'm sorry. But the boat's big enough for four people not to get in each other's way. You two just stay in the stern, do a little fishing. I'll see that she stays forward, or up in the flybridge. I can run the boat from the pilot's bridge down here, or from up there either way."

After breakfast he showed them the pilot's bridge. "Dual controls," he said, "for the two diesels. This is clutch, this is throttle. Midway, that's idle, forward for going ahead, back to reverse, down all the way to stop. That's all there is to that. And the wheel here, just like a car, only you allow for more time and space for everything to happen. Okay?" He glanced around at the instrument panel. "You won't need more than that. In case Charlie gets a big one, I might have you run us while I help him. Oh, yeah, here's the starter, just in case you need it. Just flip it on."

Again Charlie was struck by the simplicity and the beauty of the boat. He was very much afraid the Skaggs boys were running more than fish out of the gulf waters. And he told himself to forget it, he wanted no part of the drug business; he was retired.

Dino got Charlie baited up, urged Constance again to give it a try, then went below. In a few minutes, he said, they'd start trolling. Constance looked at the water, almost too bright to stand; there were long, smooth swells, and now and then there was a soft plop as water broke against the side of the boat. She had grown used to the lesser slaps of water; the larger sounds broke the rhythm. Something splashed out of sight behind her and she wondered, prey or predator? The sea stretched out endlessly, formless, exactly the same everywhere, and yet different under the lazy swells. It would be terrifying to be out there alone, she thought; they were so small and the sea was so big. Another splash sounded and this time she swiv-



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eled to see what it was. She could not even see ripples. Prey or predator? She caught a movement from the corner of her eye, turned farther, and looked into the eyes of June Oliveira up on the flybridge. She's frightening because her expression never changes, Constance thought, and abruptly swung back around. She felt cold in the hot sunlight. She should have known that woman would be aboard. It had been easy enough to figure out that Bramley had planned his accident to take place at sea.

"Why didn't you argue with Dino at least a little?" she asked bitterly.

"Wouldn't have done any good. I'm afraid we're on a drug run, honey. I think he uses the fishing charter business as a cover. So let's just play it real cool. I'm in the insurance racket and you're a housewife. Period. We don't know from nothing. Right?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" she muttered helplessly, and stared at the brilliant water until her eyes smarted.

Dino brought her a big floppy straw hat and a long-sleeved shirt. "You're going to cook," he said. "You're already burning. People as pale as you are can get sun poisoning without ever getting warm."

"Thanks," she said, and he ducked away quickly, back to the pilot's bridge. Soon the boat began to move a little faster through the calm waters. "He's hard to hate," Constance said, tying the ribbon of the hat under her chin.

Charlie nodded, and thought, but he's a drug runner. Sometimes he tried to sort out the criminals he hated most on a scale from one to ten. Usually he put arsonists first, but he knew that was prejudice. He had had to get transferred from the arson squad when he had started having nightmares, had smelled smoke where there wasn't any, and suspected smoldering rags behind all locked doors. Child molesters came next, then rapists, and drug pushers, murderers . . . But he always changed the order even as he composed it because some of them obviously had to be second, and they couldn't all be. He glanced at Constance; her eyes were closed.

He woke up with a start. Dino had touched his shoulder. "Sorry," Charlie muttered. Constance was coming awake also.

"Doesn't matter," Dino said. "If you'd got a strike that would have waked you up pretty fast. Just wanted to tell you, might as well reel in. I'm taking us to a place to try some reef fishing. Might get something there. Good place for scuba diving." He looked at Charlie hopefully, shrugged when Charlie shook his head.

Dino sent June Oliveira down from the flybridge, and then the



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boat stood up and raced through the water. Charlie nodded at Constance. He had suspected there was a lot more power in the engines than they had witnessed before.

June Oliveira braced herself in the doorway to the galley; she looked terrified. Constance remembered what Lou Bramley had said about her: she did nothing dangerous. Obviously she thought what they were doing was dangerous. Constance was glad to see that she did have at least one other expression.

When Dino cut the engines and came down he looked happy, as if this was what he liked to do, open it up and roar, leaving a wide white wake behind them as straight as a highway through a desert.

"Lunchtime," he said cheerfully. "Then you'll get a snapper or two, Charlie. Bet you a ten spot on it."

He would have won. Charlie caught a red snapper within the first fifteen minutes of fishing over the reefs.

"It's a beauty," Dino said. "Catch its mate and that's our supper. Go ashore, build a little fire, roast them on a spit. That's good eating, Charlie. Just you wait and see." He was keeping an eye on the progress of the sun, evidently timing their day carefully. "You've got half an hour." He watched Charlie bait his hook, patted him on the back, and left with the first snapper, to put it on ice. The boat was again on automatic, moving slowly over the shadows of the reefs.

Charlie was excited and pleased with himself, Constance knew, standing close to him, watching the water. The live fish on his line went this way and that, and vanished. Charlie was muttering that it was pulling, maybe he had something, no it was just the bait fish. Something splashed behind them. Charlie let out more line as his bait fish headed deeper.

Constance was watching, looking down, when she caught a glimpse of a larger motion. She jerked her head around and saw Dino in the water behind them.

"Charlie! Look!"

He dropped his rod and grabbed at one of the life preservers clamped in place against the side of the cabin. "Get this thing back there!" he yelled to Constance as he moved.

She raced through the cabin, through the salon to the pilot's bridge. Put it on manual, she thought clearly, and flipped the automatic control off. Pull the control back to reverse. She pulled the lever back, heard a slight click as it passed neutral, and then the engines stopped. She groaned and hit the lever back up to the neutral position, aligned the clutch control. She pushed the starter, nothing.



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She repeated it several times before she gave up and ran back to the stern where Charlie was standing rigidly, staring at the water behind them. Their momentum was pushing them forward slower and slower.

"I killed the engines," Constance said, tearing off her hat, loosening her sneaker with her other hand.

"What are you doing?" Charlie asked. His voice sounded strange, forced.

"I'm going in after him."

Charlie's hand clamped painfully on her arm. He was still looking at the water. Now Constance looked. There was the life preserver, nearly two hundred feet away, bobbing easily. There was no sign of Dino.

"I almost hit him with it," Charlie said in that strained, thick voice. "He could have reached out and touched it, caught it. He never made a motion toward it. He wasn't even trying to swim."

"I can still get him up," Constance said, jerking her arm, trying to get loose.

"No! He went down like a stone. He's on the bottom, already dead. He wasn't even struggling."

Constance felt her knees threaten to buckle. She turned to look at the flybridge: June Oliveira was standing up there facing the life preserver. Her eyes were closed.

"She did it," Constance whispered. "She killed him."

"Take it easy, honey," Charlie said. "She was up there the whole time." He turned away from the water now. "He must have had a stroke or something, couldn't move, couldn't swim. He didn't even yell. Maybe he was already dying before he fell in."

"You don't just fall overboard," Constance said, watching June Oliveira, who hugged herself, opening her eyes. She looked at Constance; her expression was as blank as ever. She moved to the ladder and descended from the flybridge.

"I think I lie down now," she said.

They watched her enter the cabin. "Let's go up there and see if we can get this boat started," Charlie said. He sounded tired. Wordlessly Constance started up the ladder to the flybridge.

The flybridge was built over the main cabin; the front was enclosed, the rear open with another fighting chair. There were wraparound windows and a control panel exactly like the one below, the same wheel, dual controls for the engines, automatic pilot. The same array of dials and indicators that neither of them understood. Charlie sat down behind the wheel and looked at the controls: the au-



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tomatic was turned to Off, it must have moved when Constance turned it below. The dual controls were both at midpoint, in neutral. He turned on the starter. Dead.

"I thought it might be like a car engine," Constance said. "Maybe I flooded it when I moved the throttle too fast." She knelt down and tried to see behind the control panel. It was all enclosed.

"What are you looking for?"

"A wire. She must have pulled a wire loose or something."

Charlie shook his head. "Knock it off, honey. I'm telling you, she was nowhere near him. Let's go find the engines. Maybe we can tell if it's flooded, or if a battery connection is loose."

"See if the radio works," Constance said.

Charlie had no idea what most of the switches and knobs were for, but he did know how to operate a radio. It was dead.

At three Charlie called June Oliveira to the galley. He had made coffee, and was drinking a beer. Constance watched the other woman warily when she drew near to sit at the small table. She said she wanted nothing when Charlie offered her a drink.

"We're in a spot," Charlie said. "I don't think it's especially serious, but still, there it is. I can't make this boat go. I don't know how and neither does my wife. Do you know how to run it?"

She shook her head. "It is the first time I am on a boat."

"I thought so. Okay. So we have to wait for help. We have no electricity, and that means no lights. Someone may spot us before dark, if not, we'll have to take shifts and keep a watch. I'm afraid we might be run down, or we might miss a passing ship or small boat. I found a flare gun to signal with if we see anything." He poured more coffee for Constance.

"His brother, he is expecting us," June Oliveira said. "When we do not arrive, he informs the authorities. Yes? They come for us then."

Charlie shrugged. He was trying to place her accent. Not Spanish, not anything he had heard before. Portuguese? He did not think so; there had been some Sao Paulo students at the crime lab, eight, nine years ago, and they had not sounded like her. He said, "Eventually they'll come, but I doubt they'll hear from Petie right away." Little brother, he thought, would have to hide something first, bury it, sink it at sea, do something. Depending on where he was, little brother might have to be rescued also. "We'd better prepare for an all-night wait, and a daylight search tomorrow."

"If there is more beer . . . " June Oliveira said then.



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He took one from the refrigerator and handed it to her. Already the ice was melting. They would have to eat before dark, before the butter melted, the other food spoiled.

"If you two will start keeping a watch now," he said, "I'll gather up everything I can think of that we might need during the night. I found one flashlight only, so we'd better have things in one place." He handed a pair of binoculars to Constance. "You take the flybridge. Yell out if you see anything. Miss Oliveira, you go forward and keep an eye open for a ship. Later we'll switch around, choose lots or something. Okay?"

Constance watched her go around the cabin to the forward deck before she started up the ladder to the flybridge. Charlie handed up the coffee and the binoculars to her.

"Be careful," she said softly.

Charlie felt a twinge of impatience with her. He nodded and turned to his task. When Constance got a notion, he thought, she played it to the bitter end, no matter how ridiculous it was. He scanned the water briefly before going back inside. He could no longer see the life preserver and he was glad even though he could not tell if the boat had drifted, or if the wind had simply taken the doughnut away. He was glad it was not there, a constant reminder that he had done nothing at all, and had prevented Constance from trying to do anything. She swam like a fish; she might have saved him. He did not believe it, but the thought came back over and over. He remembered his own feeling of terror at the idea of letting Constance go over the side after Dino: what if she had gotten out there and just stopped swimming, as Dino had done? He knew he could not have helped her, he would have watched her look of incomprehension, fear, disbelief . . .

Angrily he jerked up a life jacket and stood holding it. Where to put things? Not on the table, which they would be using off and on. Not in the saloon, probably they would take turns sleeping on the couch. Finally he opened the door to the stateroom he and Constance had shared the night before. He put the life jacket on her bunk and went out to continue his search, a first-aid kit, what else? He was not certain what they might need, he could make no list and then go search. All he could do was collect things he saw that looked useful. He felt the same helplessness now that he had experienced when Constance had said they did not even know what switch to throw to put out an anchor to stop their drift. He did not know where they were, how fast they might be drifting, or in what direction, not necessarily pushed by the wind, although they might be; it was also



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possible that they were in a current from the Florida straits. He simply did not know.

Constance made a hurried scan of the horizon in all directions, and then a slower search. She saw birds, and she saw porpoises in the distance. A few hours ago the sight would have thrilled her, seeing them leaping; now it was depressing that only the creatures of the sea were out there. Charlie clearly thought Dino's death was the result of a seizure of some sort; she knew she would not be able to convince him of anything else. Up here, examining the problem logically, she agreed that it had been an accident, but she rejected the logic. She knew June Oliveira had been responsible even if she did not understand how she had done it. She knew, and accepted, that she would not have been able to save Dino. It would not have been allowed. She could not see the woman from on the flybridge, and she could not hear Charlie moving about. She bit her lip and strained to hear something, but there was only the slap, slap of water on the side of the boat, and a faraway bird call. She went down the ladder and met Charlie coming up from the cabin.

"What's wrong? Did you see a ship?"

"No. I just came down for my hat." She had left it in the saloon. She retrieved it and started up again. "Charlie, say something to me now and then, or whistle, or something. Okay?" His nod was perfunctory and absent-minded. He was tying a self-inflating rubber raft to the side rail, out of the way of traffic, but available if they needed it. A second raft was already tied in place. Constance returned to her post and did the entire search again.

The sun was getting lower; a couple more hours of daylight, she thought, and then the long night wondering what Oliveira would do next, if she could do anything as long as Constance was awake and watching her. She leaned over the side of the flybridge and called, "Charlie, is there plenty of water?"

"Yeah, I checked. And plenty of coffee," he added, as if reading her mind. She smiled slightly and looked at the sea.

They should eat something before it started to get dark, she decided a little later. Oliveira could come up here while she made something; she started down the ladder again. There was only the gentle sloshing sound of water. Charlie was still below, maybe swearing at the engines . . . She took a step toward the cabin door, paused, and instead went to the side of the cabin and looked forward. June Oliveira was standing near the cabin windows, and beyond her, ten feet away, Charlie was swinging one leg over the rail.



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Soundlessly Constance dashed the fifteen feet to the woman and hit her with her shoulder, knocking her flat. She kept going and grabbed Charlie, who was clinging to the rail, dangling over the water. She hauled on Charlie's arms and he pulled himself up, got purchase with his foot and heaved himself back aboard. He was the color of putty.

June Oliveira was starting to sit up.

"You move another muscle and I'm going to throw you overboard!" Charlie yelled at her. He unfastened the inflatable raft he had secured to the rail and tied the rope to one of the loops on it. Holding it over the side, he pulled the release and then dropped it, keeping the rope in his hand, letting it out as the raft fell and settled.

"Now get up!" he ordered. "Over the side, down the ladder. Move!"

She shook her head. "I am hurt! Your wife attacked me! I think my back is broken."

"You'd better be able to swim, lady. You go down under your own power, or I'm going to throw you in. Right now!"

"You are crazy," she said.

"Hold this," Charlie said, handing the end of the rope to Constance, taking a step toward the woman. She was on her knees, and now she scrambled up, clinging to the side of the boat, then to the rail. She looked terrified, the way she had looked when Dino had roared at full speed over the water. "There's the ladder," Charlie said, stopping within reach of her. She backed away, stepped up the two steps to the rail, and over it, down the ladder. Charlie maneuvered the raft closer and she stepped into it, clutching the sides. "Get down low," he said. "I'm towing you to the other side." He didn't wait for her to crouch down, but yanked on the rope and hauled the raft, bumping and rubbing against the boat hull, around to the other side where he tied it securely.

"Let's go below," he said to Constance then. "I sure as God want a drink."

Silently he poured bourbon for them both, added some shrunken ice cubes, and took a drink from his.

A long shudder passed over him and his knees felt weak. He sat down and pulled Constance to his side, put his arm around her shoulders and held her tight against him.

"Oh, Charlie," she said softly, "I'm afraid we've caught ourselves a boojum."

He held her tighter. He still saw himself going into the water, not struggling, not trying to swim, going under, down, down . . . .



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"I think you're right," he said. His voice was so normal that few people would have detected the difference, the slight huskiness, the almost too careful spacing of words.

"Do you know what happened to you?" Constance asked. She drank also and welcomed the warmth; she had become icy cold now that the woman was in the raft, and she and Charlie were side by side.

"I was going to go over just as if I had decided to do it. I was doing it and I was watching myself do it, watching her watching me, pushing me, not even trying not to go, not even trying to resist. I was just doing it."

She nodded. Neither of them said, *like Dino.* "What are we going to do?"

"Remember when I read 'The Hunting of the Snark' to Jessica? Remember what she said when I asked what she'd do if she caught a boojum?"

Constance nodded again. Jessica had said the only thing to do was cut it loose and run.

"It might come to that," Charlie said grimly. "It just might." He took the last swallow of his bourbon, then pushed the glass away. He got up and put the coffee pot on the burner to heat it. "Start with the first time you saw her, the first thing Bramley said about her," he said. "You were right, honey. I should have paid attention. Let's try to make some sense out of it now."

He stopped her when she told again how Lou Bramley had bypassed her to sit at a table with June Oliveira. "Exactly what did he do?"

"You know the wide doors? He stood there looking around until he spotted me and he started toward my table." She closed her eyes visualizing it. "Then he looked past me and he didn't look at me again. His face changed a little, became set, almost like a sleepwalker, or someone in trance." She opened her eyes. "She did it then too. I was blind not to realize."

"You couldn't have known," Charlie said. "Then what?"

"I waited a minute or two. Then I decided to spoil it for her, to join them. I got up and started toward their table. . . ." She stopped, remembering. "I thought it was my decision to take a walk instead. Oh, my God, I wasn't even aware . . . I didn't even wonder about it!"

Charlie squeezed her shoulder. "Try to remember exactly how it was, honey. I think it may be important. What was he doing when you started to walk?"

"His back was to me. He was staring at the water. I got pretty close to them before I changed my . . . He hadn't moved, I'm sure.



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Then I turned right." She stopped, eyes closed. "I think he might have stood up, there was a motion. I just caught it from the corner of my eye, and I was thinking how hot it was on the sand. It was sunny, and I had been trying to avoid the hot sun. I went a little farther and decided I didn't want to walk after all."

"You were thinking it was hot, all that, close to their table?"

She nodded. "What is it, Charlie?"

"She couldn't hold both of you," he said. "She got you past the table and lost him, grabbed him back and lost you. What do you think?"

She considered it and nodded. "But we can't be certain. We can't count on it."

"No, but it's something." The other thing she had said, that the woman did nothing dangerous, alarmed him. No doubt she thought it was very dangerous out there on the raft with night coming on fast. She might even be right; it could be dangerous. He didn't know.

"I'd better start making sandwiches," Constance said. "We're all going to be hungry eventually."

"Okay, but keep talking. What else was there?"

She talked as she rummaged in the refrigerator and the cabinets. When she stopped again, Charlie was staring fixedly at the tabletop, deep in thought. She did not interrupt him, but continued to assemble the sandwiches.

It did not make any sense to him. If she had that kind of power, to control people like that, why use it in such a perverse way? Murder was so commonplace, never really dull, but not exciting either; it was always sad, always futile, always the action of ultimate failure. It was the final admission that there was no solution to a problem, no human solution. But no one needed her kind of power to commit murder. A gun, a knife, poison, a brick, a fire . . . he had seen them all; death that looked accidental—a fall, car exhaust in a closed garage, a leaky gas stove, overdoses of everything that could be swallowed. All filthy, all irreversible, all committed by ordinary people for ordinary reasons: money, sex, revenge, greed. . . . All committed without her kind of power. That was the puzzle. Why use such a gift for something so mundane? And why out here in God knew what part of the Gulf? She could be knocking people off every day of the week—running them in front of trains, making them jump from high places, forcing them to put bullets through their brains. Who would suspect? Each and every one would go down as accidental, or suicide.

He remembered what Lou Bramley had said, that she had known



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he was going to die and wanted to watch. He nodded.

Constance, seeing the nod, stopped all movement, waiting, but Charlie continued to stare through the tabletop.

Bramley had been broadcasting death and she had picked it up somehow. She had planned to watch for whatever insane pleasure that gave her, and she had been cheated. Again Charlie nodded. She had had her death through murder, not suicide. And she planned to kill the witnesses. Now he shook his head. No one had witnessed anything. What could he or Constance say that could damage her? She could make a better case against them. Of course, if she was a psychopath, none of the best reasoning in the world would apply to her. He rejected that also. She was the boojum, an *it*, not like other people. He could not fathom her motives in either event—a whacko, or something inhuman. And, he thought, motives were not the issue. What she might try next was the only issue now. She had tried to kill him, damn near succeeded, and she no doubt would try again.

But she had not come out here to kill, he said to himself, and he held onto that one thought as the only clue he had about her, the only thing he was reasonably certain about. If the original plan had worked, Bramley would be dead now, a legitimate suicide passing for accident, and she and Dino would be back ashore. Their stories would have been accepted: Dino was well known; the insurance would have entered into it. Finis. Dino's death was a different matter. No one would believe he had fallen off his own boat in a dead calm, in the first place. And it was less plausible to suggest that he had not got back aboard even if he had managed to fall. Although no one could prove anything else, no one would ever believe that story. What if there were others, like her, who would know the story he and Constance could tell was true? His skin prickled all over at the thought that his people would never believe his story, but that her people, if she had people, would.

He was certain she planned to be the sole survivor of a ghastly tragedy. No one knew he and Constance were aboard. If they vanished, no one would know that. The contract would be found with Bramley's name, and he was in New York, out of it. She could say anything to account for Dino's disappearance, and he was the only one she would have to account for actually.

Constance froze in the motion of cutting through a sandwich, Charlie lifted his head and listened. June Oliveira was calling them in a shrill, panic-stricken voice.

Then went out together, staying close to each other. Constance still carried the butcher knife.



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"There is a shark! I saw it! You can not keep me out here! I will stay in the little room. You lock the door. Please, I did not do nothing. You know I did not!"

In the west a spectacular sunset was blossoming; the light had turned deep pink, making June Oliveira look flushed, almost ruddy, very normal, ordinary, and very frightened.

"Who are you?" Constance demanded.

"I see him starting to climb over the rail, and I am petrified. I cannot move. I am terrified of water. I can not to help him or call out or anything. I am coward. I am sorry."

"You don't just watch them die, do you?" Constance said. "You weren't watching Dino. Your eyes were closed. You feel it, experience it. Why? Why don't you feel your own people's deaths? Why ours?"

"She crazy," June Oliveira wailed to Charlie. "She crazy!"

"I saw you," Constance said. "You knew exactly when Dino died. We couldn't know, but you did. You planned to experience Lou's death. You come here to feel death without dying yourselves, don't you? Do your people ever die? Just by accident, don't they? Isn't that why you're so terrified of water, of speeding, of anything that might be dangerous?"

"Please give me jacket, or sweater. I am cold. So afraid," June Oliveira moaned.

"For God's sake," Charlie said and turned away. "I'll get her jacket."

"How many of you are there?" Constance asked furiously. "How many murders do you commit? How many accidents do you cause?"

The woman was huddled down, her arms wrapped about herself. Suddenly Constance realized what she had done; she had separated them. She turned to see Charlie in the narrow passage between the rail and the cabin, coming toward her, carrying the heavy gaff, the iron hook Dino had said they used on the big ones. Charlie's face was peaceful, relaxed, the way it was when he was asleep.

Constance put the knife to the rope tethering the raft. "Let him go or I'll cut you loose! You'll drift away. He can't bring you back, he doesn't know how." She began to cut.

She stopped the sawing motion and watched as if from a great distance as the knife turned in her hand, began to move toward her midsection. In the stomach, she thought, so death wouldn't be too fast. There would be time to feel it all, to know it was happening. . . .

Charlie leaped at her, grabbed the knife and threw it out into the water. His hand dripped blood.

Constance sagged, then straightened. "My God, oh, my God!



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You're hurt! Let's go fix it." Neither of them looked at the woman in the raft as they hurried away, back inside the cabin.

"What are we going to do?" Constance whispered. "Charlie, what can we do? We can't even cut her loose!"

"Get the first-aid kit," Charlie said calmly. "You'll need the flashlight. The kit's on your bed. Bring a clean towel too."

Constance snatched up the flashlight and ran to the stateroom for the kit and towel. When she returned, Charlie was washing the blood from his hand. She dried and bandaged it and neither spoke until she was done.

"I'm going to kill her," Charlie said. He reached out and gently touched the shirt Constance had on. There was a slash in it; she had not even noticed, had not realized how close it had been.

This was why some people murdered, Charlie thought, because there really was no solution, no human solution. How easy it was to step across that line. He felt as if he had always known that, had denied knowing it, had pretended it was not true, when of course it had been true from the beginning. When he had transferred from the arson squad it had been because he had dreamed too many times that he was the one arranging the materials, pouring the oil or the gasoline, setting the match. The thrill of the pursuer, the thrill of the pursued, who could tell how different they were? Now that he had crossed that imaginary line, that arbitrary line that each cop drew for himself, he knew the thrill was the same, the desperation the same, the fear; it was all the same.

"We can't cut her loose," he said in that deceptively calm voice. "So we cut ourselves loose. We have to go out in the other raft, get the hell away from her. She'll try again, maybe soon. Before it gets much darker." He glanced about the galley. "Start packing up everything you think we might need for tonight and tomorrow. We might not be picked up for hours, maybe a couple of days. Fill whatever you can find with water."

Thank God she didn't argue, he thought, going into the stateroom. She knew their chances of escaping as well as he did, knew their only chance was in getting distance between them and June Oliveira. He lifted the mattress of his bunk; foam, he thought with disgust. There was a plywood board, and beneath it there were cabinets with linens. He nodded. It would do. He cut a circle out of the foam mattress with his pocket knife and tucked the extra piece under the pillow on the other bed. He had seen a can of charcoal starter in a cabinet in the galley; he went out to get it. He took the flashlight back with the can. He soaked the plywood board and let



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it air out before he replaced the mattress. In the hole he now put a folded towel and then added a layer of crumpled toilet paper, then another towel, this one folded in such a way that the paper was exposed in the center of it. He studied it for a minute and sighed. The gasoline fumes were gone, the odor so faint that he might not have noticed it if he were not sniffing. In one of the cabinets in the saloon he had seen cigarettes. He went to the saloon and found the new package and opened it, lighted a cigarette with the flame from the stove. Constance was filling a plastic water bottle, a collapsible gallon jug. There were two at the bottom of the stairs, already filled. She looked startled at the cigarette, but she still asked no questions.

"About ready?" Charlie asked.

She nodded. "It's getting dark fast."

"Yes. Come on, let's tell her our plans."

"Charlie . . . " She stopped; there was not enough time to spell it all out. She followed him to the door.

Charlie went to the corner of the cabin and yelled, "You, you can have the goddam boat! We're taking off in the other raft. Before we go I'm going to toss the portable ladder over your side so you can climb aboard. Just leave us alone and let us take off. Is it a deal?"

He puffed the cigarette hard. It was not yet dark, but within half an hour it would be. Already the water looked solid, impenetrable, and there were two stars in the deep violet sky. She must be calculating her chances of getting one of them before dark, making the other bring her aboard. He was not even sure she could make someone do anything as complicated as that; she was not a telepath. Her power was cruder, a total assault, a complete takeover. She could not read their thoughts, he said to himself, praying it was true.

"If you leave the flashlight. Put it on the flybridge, turned on so I can see it." She sounded calmer, and was controlling her accent and syntax better, but her voice was still tremulous.

He let out his breath. "Okay. We're taking provisions with us, water and stuff. It'll take us a few minutes, ten maybe."

He nodded to Constance. "Let's get the life jackets and other stuff over by the ladder."

As Constance began to carry things from the cabin to the railing Charlie entered the stateroom again. He lighted a second cigarette from the first and put them both very carefully on top the paper in the hole in the mattress. He pulled the sheet over it, and the bedspread, with ripples in it for air to pass through easily. For years he had known how easy it would be, how well he would be able to do it. He put the extra life jackets on that bed, and he was through.



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He left the stateroom door open when he went into the cabin. One last thing he had to get, he thought, almost leisurely, and he went to the drawer where he had seen an assortment of thread and needles. He chose the largest needle, a darning needle, or a sail-mending needle; it was four inches long and only slightly less thick than an icepick. He stuck it through his shirt. Constance returned for the last of the items she had put aside, the bag of sandwiches.

"Listen," he said to her softly. "We'll put the raft out, make sure the paddles are in it, and then load. While you're putting the flashlight on the flybridge, I'm going to swim around the boat. The last thing you do is hang the ladder over the side; make sure it's secure. We don't want her to get suspicious now. Then you get in the raft and start paddling to the front end of the boat. You pick me up there and we paddle like hell."

"What are you going to do?"

He pointed to the needle. "Puncture her escape route."

Constance shook her head and began to strip. "That's my department," she said. "You'd never make it in time, and you splash like a puppy. Same plan, different performers."

"No!" He saw her, arms crossed over her chest, sinking, sinking . . . .

"Yes! Let's move!" She was making a bundle of her clothes. She had on only her bra and panties. Now she reached out and took the needle and put it through the top of the bra. "You know the only way it'll work is if I do that part. You know that. We don't dare have her out in the water alive. We have no idea how far she can reach."

He pulled her to him and kissed her hard, and then they hurried to get the raft into the water, get it loaded. Only one quadrant of the sky was still light now; to the east and sky and sea merged in blackness.

"Arrange it any way you can," Charlie said, nodding to her, when they were through. She slipped from the raft soundlessly and vanished into the dark water. "That looks good enough for now. When I get in we can shift things around some. I'll put the flashlight up there, and then give her the ladder. You okay?"

It was all taking much longer than he had realized it would, he thought bleakly. What if smoke began to pour from the cabin? What if she got suspicious, caught Constance down there in the water? What if she took this as her last chance to get them both? He climbed to the flybridge and put the flashlight down, shining toward the stern, away from where Constance might be surfacing. What if there really had been a shark? He felt weak with fear; his hands were



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trembling so hard he could scarcely hold the rail as he left the flybridge to get the ladder.

Constance surfaced at the prow of the boat and waited. There was the ladder, and Charlie was running away to the other side. June Oliveira had to haul herself in hand over hand to reach the ladder; she started to climb. Constance sank below the surface again and swam to the raft. She lifted her face only enough to get air, then went under and pulled out the needle and stuck it into the raft. The raft bobbed and she stopped moving, afraid the woman would be alarmed, turn around. She stuck the needle in three more times before she had to surface for air. The next time she went under she swam toward the prow of the boat, praying that Charlie would be there by now.

When Charlie first started to paddle, he found himself moving away from the boat at right angles. Frantically he pulled with one paddle until he bumped the boat. Keeping against the hull, using one paddle only, he finally got to the front end. Where was she? She should be here by now, he thought with despair, and she appeared at the side of the raft. He grabbed her arm and hauled her in, and she began to pull on her clothes as fast as she could. She was shivering hard. Before she got her shirt buttoned, Charlie was putting the life jacket on her. He was wearing his already. As soon as she had the life jacket tied, she took her place by him, took up the paddle and they both began to row hard. The raft seemed to be mired in tar, but gradually they pulled away from the boat, and now Charlie could see a light bobbing in the windows of the cabin, then the pilot's cabin, stern She was checking it out, as he had thought she might. She went to the flybridge and in a minute or two the boat's engines started up.

Constance groaned and pulled harder on her paddle. It was no use, she thought dully. She would run them down, watch them die anyway, feel them die.

"We have to stay behind the boat," Charlie said. "You know how to turn these things?"

"You push, I pull," Constance said, knowing it was no use. They could dodge for awhile, but eventually they would tire, or she would make one of them stop paddling, or something.

Slowly they made the raft go astern. The boat was not moving yet, the engines were idling. Now the lights came on. Constance blinked as the light hit them. "Charlie, she can back up!" she whispered.



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"Christ!" He had forgotten.

The boat began to move forward, not very fast; the wake shook the small raft, tilting it high to one side. The boat left them behind, then started to come around. She turned too wide and straightened far to the right of the raft. She had switched on a searchlight now, was playing it back and forth, looking for them. She seemed not to realize how wide her turn had been; the light came nowhere near them. It stopped moving.

Constance watched fearfully. The boat looked so close. The engines were so loud. She felt herself go blank, felt sleep-heavy, immobilized. When it passed, the light began to move again, this time swinging around to focus on them.

"She reached me," Constance said tonelessly. "We can't hide from her."

Why didn't the damn boat start burning? He knew it had to burn. He visualized the fire that had to be smoldering along the bed board, in the cabinet under the bed. The towels should be blazing by now. The boat was turning slowly; she was being careful. She had all the time in the world, she seemed to be telling them, keeping them pinned by the blinding light, keeping them waiting for her next move. Charlie wondered if she laughed. If she ever laughed.

She was steering with one hand, holding the light with the other, not letting either go to increase her speed. The throb of the engines did not change, only grew louder.

Constance began to pull on her paddle. "At least let's make her work for it," she said grimly. Charlie pulled hard, sending them on the beginning of another circle. Then suddenly the light made an arc, swung wildly away, up, down, off to the other side.

"I'll be damned," he said, pleased. Smoke was rolling from the cabin windows. He began to pull on the paddle again, harder now. "We should try to get some more distance from it," he said.

Silently they rowed, not making very much gain, and they watched the boat. The smoke had lessened. Constance was afraid June Oliveira had put the fire out already. Charlie felt almost smug; he knew the smoldering had turned into blazing, there would be less smoke, more heat, more fire. When the first flame showed on the side of the boat, he said, "I think we should get down in the bottom of this thing, as flat as we can." It would blow, he knew, and he did not know how much of an explosion it would be, what kind of shock there would be, if they were too close. He hoped June Oliveira was tossing water on the flames, that she had not thought of the beautiful fire equipment on board, or of abandoning the boat. He had not seen



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her since the powerful spotlight had come on.

He and Constance curled up in the bottom of the raft. "Try to keep your ears covered," he said. He raised himself enough to continue to watch, his hands cupped over his ears. Flames were shooting out every window now, licking up around the flybridge. When the explosion came, it was not as loud or as violent as he had thought it would be. A fireball formed, and vanished almost instantly, and the boat erupted in a geyser of fiery objects; the lights went off, and now there was only a low fire that was being extinguished very fast as the boat settled, began to slide under the water. They could hear a furious bubbling, then nothing, and the fire was gone. The sea was inky black.

Constance was on her knees clutching the side of the raft. She shuddered and Charlie put his arm about her, held her close. "Did she get off?" she whispered.

"I don't know yet."

They waited in silence as their eyes adapted to the darkness. Charlie could see nothing out there; he could hardly even see Constance. She was little more than a pale shadow. He strained to hear.

When it came, it sounded so close, he felt he could reach out and touch the woman. She sounded as if she was weeping. "Why do you do that? Why? Now we all die in the sea!"

He could not tell her direction, distance, anything at all. The voice seemed close, all around him.

Constance put her head down, pressing her forehead against the rounded side of the raft. "We should have slashed the other raft, scuttled it."

He had been afraid that if she had not believed she had an escape at hand, she might have used the impressive firefighting equipment. She might have been able to put out the fire with it. She might have known about the emergency hatch in the tiny engine room with the simple instructions: *Open in case of fire.* It would have flooded the engines and the fuel tanks with sea water; the boat would have been immobilized, but it would be afloat. Worse, he had feared that if she had been trapped, she might have reached out and killed them both instantly. She had been in the raft, she knew it was comparatively safe; she had to trust it again. How long would it take for the air to leak out enough? He did not know. He could hear a paddle splashing awkwardly.

"Do you remember where we put the flare gun?" he whispered. One to light up the scene, he thought; the next one aimed at her.

Constance began to grope for the gun. There was a loud splash



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close by. June Oliveira screamed shrilly.

"Sharks!" Constance yelled. She knew sharks did not make splashes, did not leap from the water. Perhaps the porpoises had come to investigate the explosion. Maybe a sea bird had dived. Her hand closed on the gun and she handed it to Charlie.

"First Charlie," the woman called out. "Constance stay with me until morning. You are good swimmer. I saw you in water. Is possible I need you to swim for me."

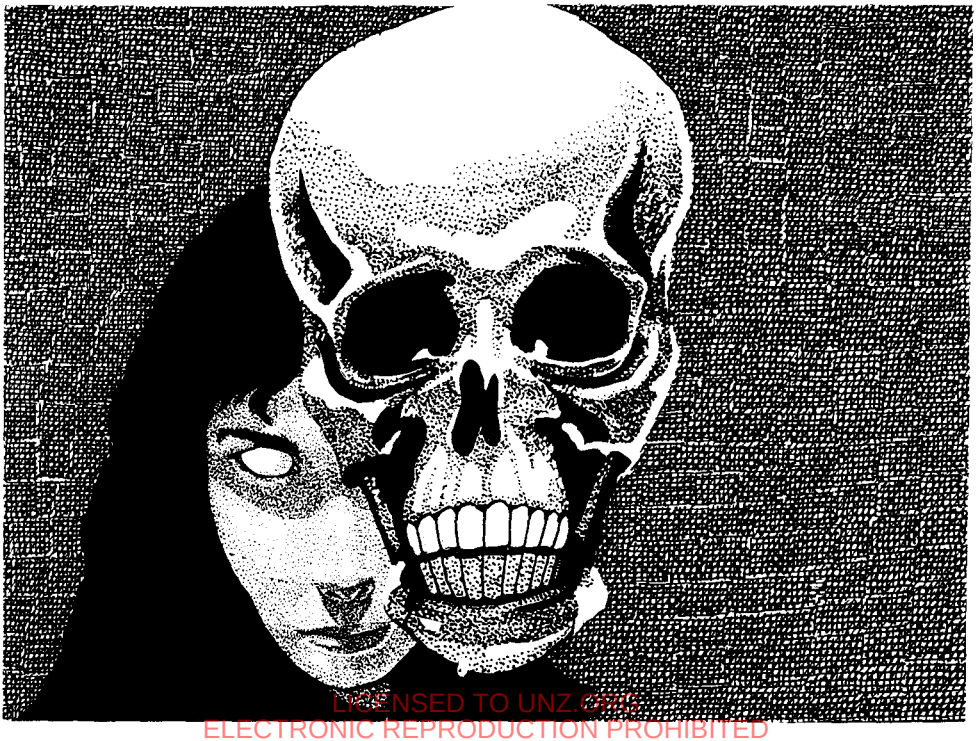
She was talking to still her terror of the water, the sharks she believed to be circling her, to break the silence. Constance recognized that shrillness, the clipped words; Oliveira was panic-stricken.

"Sometimes they come up under you and graze the boat," Constance yelled. "They're so rough, they puncture the rubber, and you don't even know it until too late. You can feel the sides of the raft getting soft, the top sinking in a little . . . "

Charlie was searching for the extra packet of flares. One was in the gun; he wanted a second to jam in and fire quickly before the light faded, while she was still dazed from the sudden glare.

"I've got it," he whispered finally. "Shield your eyes."

He fired straight up, and scanned the water. She was several hundred feet away, kneeling in the other raft, holding the paddle



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with both hands, stilled by the unexpected light. He rammed the second flare into the gun, and then pitched forward, dropping the gun, not unconscious, but without muscle tone, unable to move.

Constance snatched up the paddle and started to row as hard as she could. She was stronger than the other woman, at least she could outdistance her.

"Stop!" Oliveira called. "Stop or I kill him now. I do not like it at this distance, but I do it."

Constance put the paddle down. The light had faded already; again there was only darkness, now even deeper, blacker. Charlie lay huddled in the bottom of the raft unmoving.

"Stay very still," the woman said. "I come to your little boat. You are right about many things. During the night you explain to me how you know, what makes you guess, so I tell my people."

"Why Bramley? People are dying all the time. Why him?"

"Because I know him. We seldom know them, the people who are dying. It is more interesting to know him."

The water remained quiet around them; there were only the splashes of her paddle. She was so inept it would take her a long time to cross the distance separating them. Constance nudged Charlie with her toe. He did not respond.



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"Why don't you just hang around hospitals? People die there every hour, every day."

"They are drugged. Sometimes it is good." Her voice was getting firmer, losing its fearful note, as she narrowed the space between them, and the water remained still.

Constance nudged Charlie again. Move, she thought at him, please move, get up. "You come here and murder, kill people. Watch them suffer for your own amusement. Do you torture them to death to drag it out?"

"We are not uncivilized," the woman said sharply. "We do not kill; we participate. It does no harm."

"You killed Dino!"

There was silence, her paddle slapped the water, then again. "I expect the other one. I have only until Sunday. I will be forgiven."

Constance shuddered. She reached out and touched Charlie's face. She wanted to lie down by him, gather him in her arms, hold him.

The paddle hit, lifted, hit. And then it suddenly splashed very hard, and the woman screamed hoarsely. "My raft getting soft! It is punctured!"

Charlie stiffened even more under Constance's hand. *She* was using him as a beacon, homing in on him.

Constance picked up one of the water jugs and heaved it out toward the other raft. It made a loud noise when it hit the water.

"Sharks are all around us!" she yelled. The other paddle stopped and there was no sound. Constance groped for something else to throw, something heavy enough to make a noise, light enough to lift and heave. Her hand closed over the paddle. She lifted it silently and brought it down hard on the water. She screamed. "They're hitting our raft! Charlie, do something!"

Charlie began to stir; he pulled himself to his knees cautiously; the woman was letting go. Her terror was so great she could no longer hold him. From the other raft there were sounds of panicky rowing, she was simply beating the water with the paddle. Charlie and Constance began to row, saying nothing, trying to slip the plastic paddles into the water without a sound, pulling hard.

"It is sinking!" the woman screamed. "Help me!"

Constance screamed also, trying for the same note of terror. She screamed again, and then listened. The other woman was incoherent, screaming, screeching words that were not human language. Soon it all stopped.

For a long time they sat holding each other without speaking.



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Now and then something splashed, now close to them, now farther away. They could see nothing.

In a little while, Charlie thought, he would fire the flare gun again, and periodically through the night repeat it. Someone would see. Maybe someone had seen the fire, was on the way already. He would have to think of a story to tell them—a fire at sea, Dino's going back after getting them into the raft. . . . He could handle that part. He had heard enough stories essentially like his, lies, excuses, reasonably enough put together to fool most people. He could do that.

And Constance was thinking: there would come a day when one or the other of them would start to doubt what had happened. What that one would remember was that they, together, had killed a crazy woman.

"She wasn't human," Charlie said, breaking the silence. And Constance knew he would be the one who would come awake at night, stare at the ceiling, and wonder about what they had done. She would have to be watchful for the signs, make him remember it exactly the way it had happened. And one day, she thought, one of them would say what neither had voiced yet: that woman had not been alone. There were others.

Charlie thought: they would live with this, knowing what they had done, that there were others out there, maybe not as murderous as this one had been, or maybe just like her. They could tell no one; no one would ever believe. Constance had her proof of that uncharted part of the psyche, and could not even use it.

"I think I dislocated my shoulder when I threw that jug out," Constance said, shifting in his arms. "I'm aching all over." And he knew his hand was bleeding through the bandage; it was throbbing painfully suddenly. He had forgotten about it. "In just a minute I'll see if there's a sling in the first-aid kit. I need a new bandage too." He felt her nod against his shoulder.

"Poor little miserable, helpless, vulnerable, hurt people," she sighed. "That's us. Adrift on an endless ocean as dark as hell. With a terminal case of life. But I wouldn't trade with them." Knowing you were gambling eternity, you wouldn't dare risk your life for someone you loved, she thought, trying to ignore the pain in her shoulder, down into her arm. You wouldn't dare love, she thought. You wouldn't dare. Period. Not far away something splashed.

Neither of them moved yet. It was enough for now to rest, to feel the solidity of the other, to renew the strength the last several hours had taken from them. Quietly they drifted on the dark sea.



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# LUKE WARM AT FORTY BELOW
## By Martin Gardner

*And now there came both mist and snow,*
*And it grew wondrous cold.*

-- *Coleridge,* The Ancient Mariner

A planet known as STC, in a solar system neighboring our own, is slightly smaller than the Earth, with a diameter of about 10,000 kilometers. The planet's first exploration, led by Earth astronauts Luke Warm and Hotta Stuph, is underway.

When home base was set up on the planet's equator, the weather was so warm that members of the landing party had to keep their space suits cooled. But while Luke was several kilometers from the base, on an expedition to gather rock samples, there came a sudden, inexplicable drop in temperature. A thick violet mist rolled over the land, and something resembling Earth snow, except it was dark purple, began to blanket the ground. Luke adjusted the dial on his belt to raise the temperature of his suit's heating system.

"What the devil is going on?" he shouted over the intercom to Hotta. She was monitoring his calls back at the base.

"How the Hell should I know," said Hotta. "You're the weather expert on this caper. What's the temperature out there?"

Luke checked the thermometer on his wrist. "Holy Asimov, I can't believe it! It's forty below!"

This conversation was being broadcast live to most television stations around the earth. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, an eighth-grade science class was watching the screen with rapt attention.

A boy in the class raised his hand. "Does Luke mean forty below on the Celsius or the Fahrenheit scale?"

The teacher scowled. "To tell you the truth, Bascom, I don't know. You'd think by now that one scale would have become standard. But as we learned last month, Americans recently became so hotly divided over the question that our Republican Congress passed a law making it legal to use either scale. I'm really not sure *how* Luke's thermometer is calibrated."

"I know exactly what temperature he's reporting," said Babs, a girl in the back row. "It's minus forty Celsius."

"Are you certain his thermometer is Celsius?" the surprised teacher asked.

"No," said the girl. "But I'm positive I'm right."

How could she be so certain? Turn to page 79 for the answer.



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# THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR
by Erwin S. Strauss

There's just one more month before the con(vention)s thin out for the holiday season. Enjoy a social weekend with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. Contact a con in your area soon. When writing, send an addressed, stamped envelope (SASE). For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code number and I'll call back at my expense. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

**World Fantasy Con.** For info, write: **Dark Carnival Books, 2812 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley CA 94705.** Or phone: **(415) 845-7757** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Berkeley CA (if city omitted, same as in address) on: 30 Oct.-1 Nov., 1981. Guests will include: Alan Garner, Peter Beagle, B. Froud, Karl E. Wagner. WorldCon for fantasy fans.

**OryCon.** Hilton Hotel, Portland OR, 30 Oct.-1 Nov. Fred ("Gateway," "Cool War") Pohl, Ursula ("Lathe of Heaven," "Dispossessed") LeGuin, F. M. ("All These Earths") Busby, Steve Fahnestalk, M. A. ("Waves") Foster, Kennedy ("Kipy") Poyser. Banquet, masquerade.

**The Bash,** Holiday Inn, Randolph MA, 30 Oct.-1 Nov. Hal ("Mission of Gravity") Clement. Star Trek con as "Interstellar Peace Conference." Be your favorite planet's ambassador.

**ICon, (319) 337-9817.** Iowa City IA, 30 Oct.-1 Nov. Phyllis ("Born to Exile") Eisenstein, Gay & Joe ("Forever War") Haldeman, Dave Martin. Masquerade ball, punning contest.

**LosCon.** Huntington Sheraton, Pasadena CA, 6-8 Nov. W. ("Far Frontier") Rotsler, Moffats.

**Intervention, (801) 486-0601.** Salt Lake City, 6-8 Nov., 1981. Larry Niven, C. J. Cherryh.

**Future Party, c/o Baker, 12103 Cypress Hollow Pl., Tampa FL 33624.** 13-15 Nov. NASA's Jesco von Puttkamer, Dave ("Dragon Lensman") Kyle. Science fact & fiction. Costumes, banquet.

**Contradiction, Michaels, 27 Argosy Dr., Amherst NY 14226.** Buffalo NY, 20-22 Nov. Springer.

**Darkover Grand Council Meeting, c/o Himmelsbach, 308 W. Duval, 1st floor, Philadelphia PA 19144. (215) 842-3491.** Wilmington DE, 27-29 Nov. C. J. ("Well of Shiuan") Cherryh, Marion Zimmer (Darkover) Bradley, Mark (Samurai Cat) Rogers, Katherine (Deryni) Kurtz, Paul Edwin ("Survivors") Zimmer. Writing workshop with MZB, masquerade, medieval combat.

**AugaCon, Box 485, Campbell CA 95009.** San Mateo CA, 27-29 Nov. Kathleen Sky, R. Faraday Nelson, Stephen Goldin, Don Simpson, Steve Perrin. Stress on fantasy role-playing games.

**MysteryKon, Box 713, Stafford TX 77477.** Houston TX, 27-29 Nov. Freas, W. A. (Bob) Tucker.

**ConCave, Box U122, Bowling Green KY 42101.** Park City KY, 4-6 Dec. Traditional relaxacon.

**PhilCon, Lawler, 2750 Narcissa Rd., Plymouth Meeting PA 19462.** Philadelphia PA, 4-6 Dec. Joe ("Mindbridge") Haldeman, artist Darrell Sweet. 45th annual run of the first SF con.

**WindyCon, Box 2572, Chicago IL 60690.** 18-20 Dec., 1981. Larry ("Ringworld") Niven, Glyer.

**HexaCon, c/o Newrock, RD2, Box 270A, Flemington NJ 08822.** Lancaster PA, 8-10 Jan., 1982. Artists Kelly ("Art of SF") Freas and Phil ("Capture") Foglio. All-you-can-eat banquet.

**ChattaCon, Box 921, Hixon TN 37343. (615) 842-9363.** Chattanooga TN, 15-17 Jan. L. Niven.

**ChiCon IV, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** 2-6 Sep., 1982. A. Bertram (Rim Worlds) Chandler, Kelly Freas, Lee Hoffman. The 1982 World SF Con. Join in 1981 for $40 and save $10.

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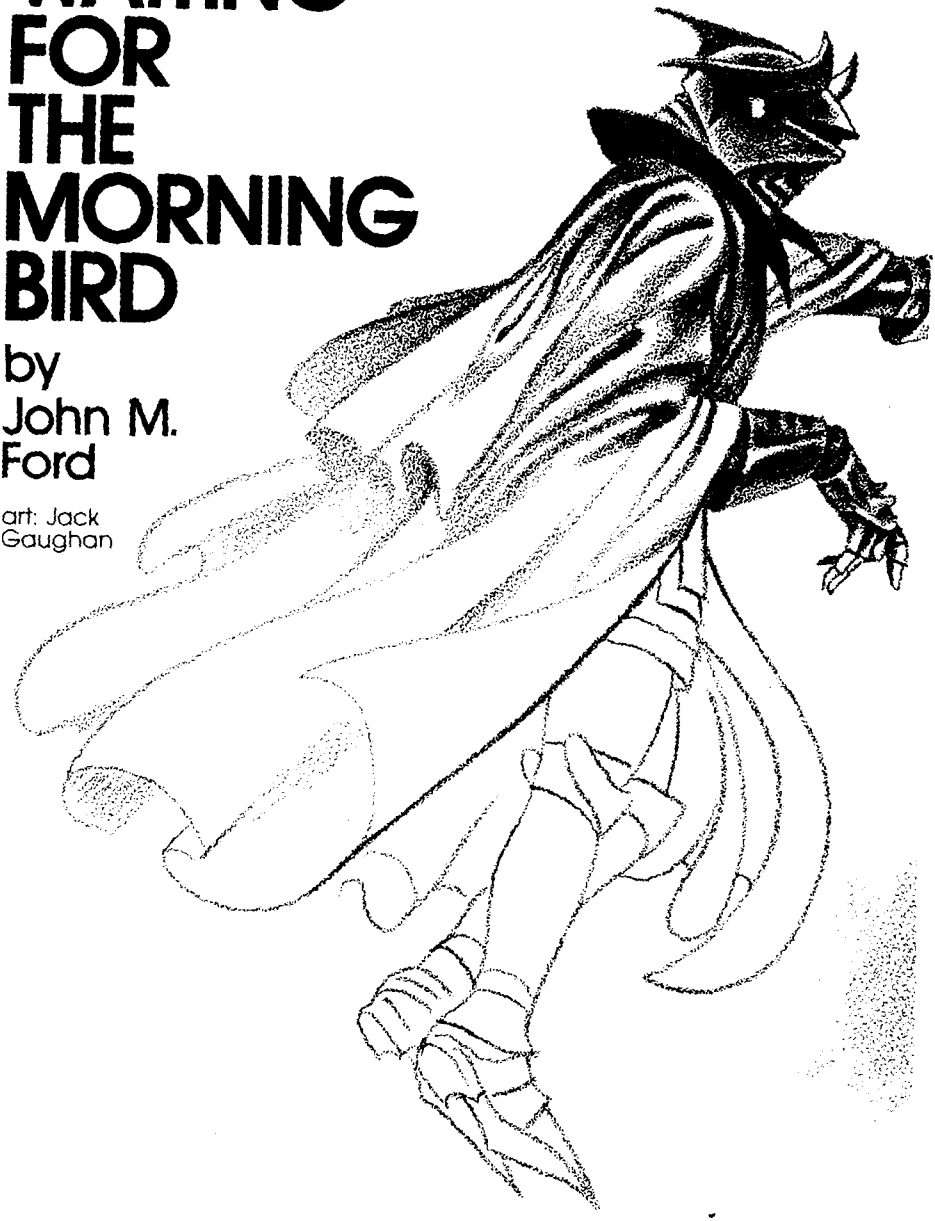
# WAITING FOR THE MORNING BIRD

by John M. Ford

art: Jack Gaughan



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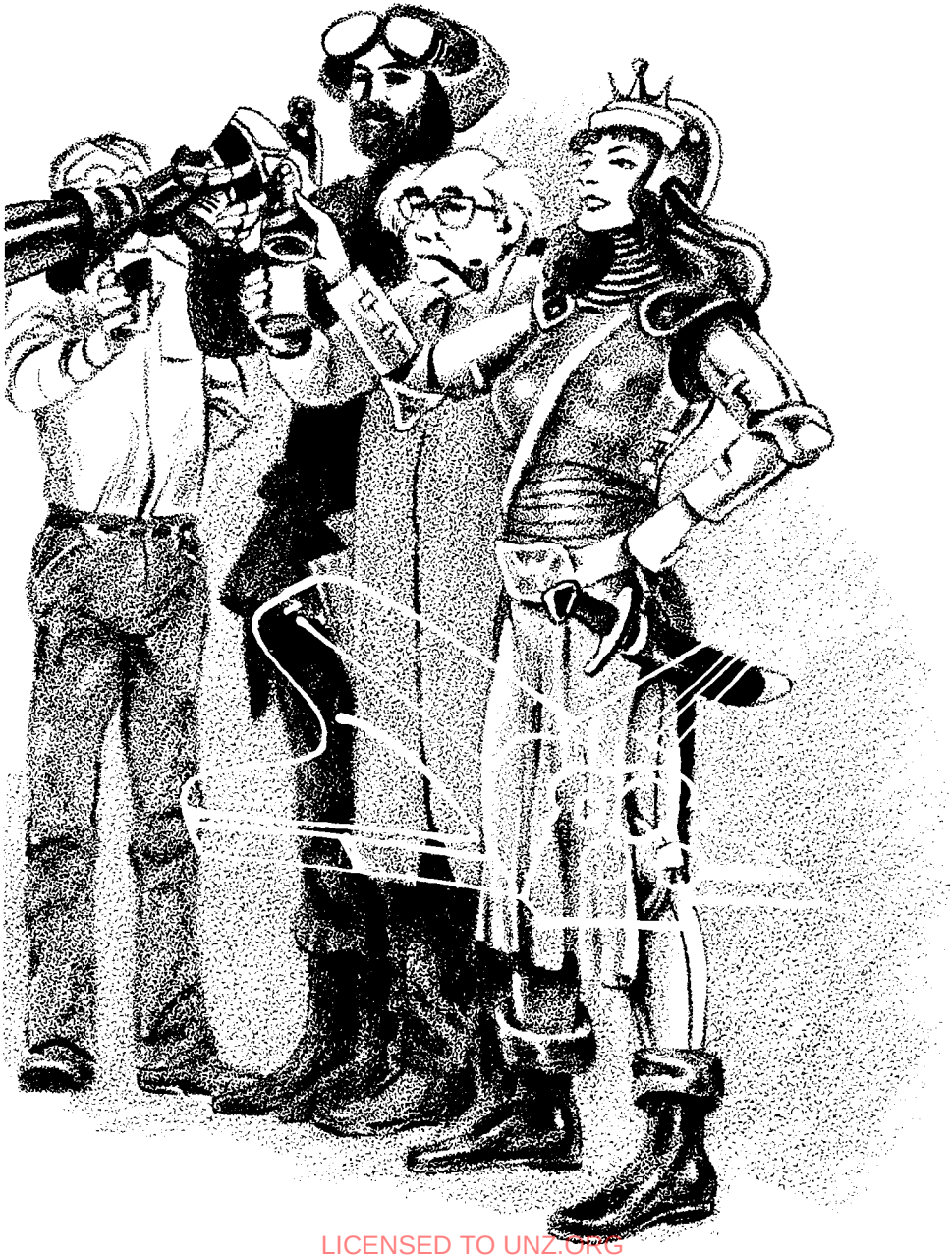

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*An obscure writer once said that all fiction is a blend of autobiography, reportage, and lies; in good fiction one cannot tell which is which. So if you want to know how much of this actually happened—well, it all did, even the true parts.*

The Space Ace breathes out a long sigh, as he always does on entering, and sits down hard in one of my tubular steel chairs, making it sigh too. He tugs off his silver-snakeskin gauntlets and shoves them in a pocket of his black leather jacket, pulls his goggles down to dangle around his neck, and grins at me. On a ship he'd spit, but not in my living room.

"You look comfortable," he says.

I'm not, of course, and the Ace knows it very well. I have an epic case of sciatica—inflammation of the long nerve running from hip to heel—which is why everything soft in the house is tucked under me. I should be in bed, I Really Should; but the bed is upstairs, and the television is downstairs, and neither one is mobile.

And there is no way I can be on the bed when the *Columbia* is on the TV. NASA is about to light me the biggest birthday candle of all time, and I should be a cad and a bounder to miss my own party.

The Ace has turned his head: I believe he realizes now that it is not the farm report I have on. Now the Ace is not a man who is impressed much by our spaceships; he lost interest about the time Dyna-Soar was cancelled. But he is looking at the Shuttle, and looking hard.

The look softens a little when he discovers that the big cylinder is not payload but fuel, and that there is nothing on the whole ship to shoot another ship with. When I point out that there are no other ships to shoot at, he gives me his patented you-impractical-fool look. I'm vaguely flattered; you usually have to be a brilliant scientist to get that look.

I run through the mission profile for the Ace's benefit, and when I talk of the deadstick landing on the dry lake bed there is something like lust in his eyes. Maybe, I can hear him thinking, the Right Stuff still counts for something after all.

"How long to zero?" he asks.

"Half an hour. There's a ten-minute hold scheduled yet."

"Any beer cold?"

"You know where."

I turn away from the Ace retreating down the hall, and see that



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the Professor is here, fiddling with the TV antenna. "I thought you had cable," he says.

"The new place will have cable. For now that's as good as it gets."

"You know," says the Prof, backing reluctantly away from the dipole, "with a good preamp and a couple of bandpass filters . . . and maybe a Faraday isolator around the living room . . ."

"Irish coffee, Professor?" I say, and he returns control of my television set to me. "The water's about to boil and we never hide the Bushmill's." The Prof grins below his glasses, tucks his hands into the bulging pockets of his lab coat, and heads off.

"You might make me one too," I say from the living room floor, as pain shoots up my leg.

"Now, you know I can't do that," the Professor says over his shoulder. "You know quite well I'm only a collective metaphor." And that's the end of that lecture, amazingly; either he needs that coffee very badly or he's really intent on seeing the launch.

*I'm* really intent on it, so I lever myself up and limp into the kitchen. The Prof is measuring coffee and whiskey with micrometric precision. The Ace is holding the refrigerator open, silhouetting the newest guest.

I say hello to the Countess, who is arguing space tactics with the Space Ace. She's gorgeous and armed to the teeth as usual; she gives me a chain-mailed hug and a pinch that supernovas several neurons, and asks, "How's business, minstrel?"

"Lousy."

"You've been hitting the realism again. Silly minstrel. Who wants to read about angst and metaphysical doubt when there are worlds to conquer? We're always here when you need us." She snatches the split of pink champagne from the refrigerator door and heads back to the living room.

I must remember to ask Alan Dean Foster if she talks this way to him.

The Space Ace looks a bit relieved—I'm sure he was losing the argument—and cracks open a beer, saying, "Wonder if the Princess is coming?"

Only the Ace would ask this. The Princess is the Countess's kid sister, and while she is lovely as a Jovian sunset she does not have one brain in her golden-haired head. She also shrieks a lot on small provocation. Ace, however, has an incurable crush on the Princess, probably because she's the only one of us who never argues with him.

The Prof sips his coffee and says absently, "The Princess and my



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daughter are at a . . . slumber party, or something." He shakes his head as if to clear it, and as is our custom we trade jokes about a certain Wisconsin wardheeler, which decorum and local ordinances forbid me from repeating here.

When we all get back to Mission Control the Baron has arrived. He's sitting in half-lotus, black boots tucked under his armored behind, levitating a yard off the floor with his cape billowing on the air conditioning. He punches a beer can with the finger of his dural-claw gauntlet, toasts us all, and pours it down a vent in his black metal mask. "Happy birthday," he says, from four octaves below middle C. It *would* be the villain who remembers.

The floating is not just theater; I never have enough chairs. And the Baron always brings his own, good stuff too, even if it is purchased with the sweat of a billion galactic peasants. In fact, though we'd never embarrass him by saying so aloud, for The Scourge of Galaxies the Baron is a right sort of guy.

He asks how the Shuttle is armed (funny how they all want to know that) and laughs from down deep at the answer. And you'll understand that when he calls us ripe for conquest he doesn't really mean it. I think.

We settle in. I settle pretty slowly today. Finally I check my multi-function digital watch and realize that the ten-minute scheduled hold should be over, and it isn't. The network commentators are discussing computers that aren't answering commands correctly.

The Baron crumples a can in his mailed fist, evidently demonstrating what he would do with a disagreeable processor. The Professor is muttering about decision hierarchies, n-valued logics, and pentode tubes, communing with the ghosts of John von Neumann and Don Channing. The Space Ace wonders why John Young doesn't just kick it. The Countess gives the Ace a swift kick with her eyes, looks at me—and I'm not reassuring—then at the screen.

The astronaut serving as "color commentator" is struggling to turn a complex and poorly defined situation into one of those inane analogies the newsfolk love so well. One of the network anchors now seems to think that the computers form a sort of parliament, with floor votes and minority whips, and that the delay is due to an electronic filibuster. Five more minutes and they'll be wanting a press conference with the machine.

The audio is switched to the capsule communications line (whoops, no "capsule" this trip), which is always interesting if not always understandable; somebody's always asking for a CRD on the K-22 before Arc Instet, that sort of thing. Anyway, John Young is saying,



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"Roger, we think the best way to deal with that is—" and we *cut to* a car commercial.

"Aargh," say I. The Prof looks puzzled, the Ace scowls, the Countess shakes her head, unbelieving. The Baron vents part of a brew into his helmet and intones, "My lackeys are always doing things like that. It's one of the faults of the system." I begin to argue that this is American television, not some vast servile empire, but I hate to be laughed at.

When we return to our scheduled launch (now over twenty minutes late), we are told of the backup computer that is being so difficult. The Ace's eyes bug at this, and his black brows knit. Ace has never in his life flown a ship with a backup anything. He rarely has spare parts aboard. His attitude toward malfunctioning subsystems is Biblical: If thine paraclastic subspace devaristator offend thee, . . .

But before his indignation can peak, we hear that a fuel cell is malfunctioning. Or . . . maybe the fuel cell malfunction indicator is malfunctioning. The Professor explains that they'll run a computer check to find out which: an error indication error indicator.

"And what if the check isn't working?" the Countess asks. "Do they run an error indi—— jumping Jirel, I can't say it."

"Oh, it *could* be infinitely recursive," the Prof says, stifling a giggle: the Irish is starting to hit him. "Programs covering up for each other's mistakes, on and on and on. But in fact it doesn't happen that way. Each examination creates a nested metasystem—"

Again I know what the Ace is thinking: Rigellian cateagles have nests, computers don't. I wonder idly if the Baron's glassed-over eyes can glaze further.

"—and ultimately the nesting capacity of the language, and/or the physical hardware, will be filled. So there *is* a final determination in the series, given a system smaller than the entire universe."

"You mean an answer?" says the Countess, patiently but not very. The Prof nods. "The *right* answer?" she says, and I catch the flick of her eyes that means she knows she shouldn't have asked that.

The Professor says, "A useful answer, yes, in the sense that it is the last answer available and one might as well base the decision upon it. But I'm not sure what you intend to imply by 'right' . . ."

*"Is the fuel cell working or isn't it?"*

"Heavens, *I* don't know. All the data available are electronic sensory epiphenomena. Voltages across gauges. Sensors telling us what they think they see."

"On Imperial worlds," the Baron rumbles, "solipsism is punishable by death."



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"But how do you convince a solipsist that he in fact *has* been executed?" says the Prof, quite reasonably.

The Space Ace, who may have been ignoring all of this, is jabbing a finger at the television. The network's man in Houston and a heavyset engineer from Rockwell International are sitting in a cockpit mockup. The engineer has a manual the size of a carpet sample book open in his lap, apparently the *Handy Guide to Shuttle Repairs.* The Ace says, "Which one of those guys is the commander and why aren't they suited up?"

"It's a mockup, Ace. It's made of plywood."

"What's wrong with plywood? Cardboard was good enough for Flash Gordon."

The reporter asks about replacing the naughty fuel cell, under the impression that it's a sort of glorified car battery.

"That's right!" the Ace shouts. "That's the first reasonable thing anybody's said all day! Yank the sucker out! My beer's empty." And he trundles off after another, which is fortunate, because he thus misses the engineer blanching and explaining that "hands-on maintenance" of the cell would take at least 24 hours.

The Countess says something about it being just like our automobiles, and the Baron laughs; she adds, "While you, Baron, remind me of a '56 Edsel," and cracks him up completely.

The Prof taps the TV with the stem of his pipe. It seems that launch guidance has to be reset, which will take another hour and a half of the roughly four left in the launch window—and if in that time they haven't solved the problems of solipsist fuel cells and swing-bloc computers, they'll very likely scrub for today.

**"Scrub?"** comes the Ace's voice from the kitchen, followed by the sound of a beer can being ripped open manually. "Are you telling me that the mission *commander* is gonna let those Slide Rule Richards *scrub* him?"

The Professor pretends he didn't hear that, and plays with the keys of my Hewlett-Packard calculator.

The Ace stomps back, sloshing Stroh's on the carpet. His zippers are jingling and his blood's up: suddenly we're back in his volume of space, and he knows what to do. He outlines the scenario:

"First I tell the kid to unjack his headphones, and we tell whats'ernames . . . Houston, yeah, that there's some kind of commo malfunction. They can't tell a fake glitch from the real thing, right?"

(I visualize John Young so ordering Bob Crippen, and Cripp, who's been an astronaut for twelve years, reacting to being called "the kid.")



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"Then, before they have time to double-check me to death—" hard look at the Prof "—or get up a countermanding hoo-hah—" same to the Baron "—I tell 'em I've got control, and the kid and I are goin' for it on our own brass. Then I pull back on the stick and—"

"He can't do it, Ace," says the Prof, and takes a long draw at his Irish coffee.

"Can't?" says the Ace, and suddenly we're all very quiet, the TV people nattering on alone. I think for a moment that the Baron is laughing behind his black steel radiator grille, but I'm wrong.

"Can't, Ace," I say. I'm the writer and they can't argue with me, but that doesn't mean I like saying it.

The Space Ace rocks back on his bootheels, his snakeskin hissing, leather creaking, a little thunderstorm all by himself. Very slowly, he says, "Well, *fresh water,*" which is *very* obscene if you're a Vegan swamp rooter; and he turns and walks out, not slamming the door only because collective metaphors can't slam doors.

The Countess says, "Well, we certainly cut him down to size, didn't we?" with nothing like triumph in it.

"Ace doesn't understand the program," the Prof says. "He doesn't realize how important this flight is."

"Then I don't understand the program either," she shoots back. "What-in-Solar-hell kind of exploration program puts all the eggs on one booster? When you Alpha Males were inventing the airplane, you didn't care if one fell apart or blew up now and then. Sorta kept the macho edge on things." Champagne does work fast.

"Those were private groups, my dear, spending their own lives and resources," the Baron says. "This is public enterprise, which make no mistake can do great things . . . as long as they do not require boldness or daring."

"A dictator defending private enterprise?" The Countess makes a move toward her blaster, which is strictly against the house rules, but the Baron waggles a gauntleted finger and the holster flap buttons itself up tight. He says calmly, "Countess, a dictatorship *is* private enterprise, on the grandest possible scale." He takes a raspy breath. "Besides . . . the Ace was, for once, absolutely right." To me: "Wasn't he?"

It's what every one of us was thinking, isn't it? "Those men can't have wanted anything else in the whole world any more. But it wasn't a corned beef sandwich this time."

"*He* was the one with the sandwich?" says the Countess, herself again.

"*Crumbs,*" mutters the Prof, from deep within an Irish mist. We



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wait for a moment, wondering what the Hell, and he says, "*Bread* crumbs. In the *white* room. Dis*grace*ful." He stands up, brushing imaginary rye seeds from his lab coat. " 'Scuse me . . . have to purge a line." He wanders down the hall, shuts the door, and yells.

"Gotcha," I say. (There is a poster inside that door; when you shut it, the Alien stares you down.)

We have now been informed that the bird will either fly or squat at 1030 hours EST. My sciatic nerve, which has been blissfully quiet through all this, begins buzzing again. I set my wrist alarm for 1000 and push up from the floor. "I'm going to get a little sleep while this thing lets me. There's no lock on the pantry, of course." Sometimes I even say that to my nonmetaphorical friends. "Tell the Ace hello when he gets back."

As I crawl upstairs, the Baron asks the Countess, "How about a game while we wait?" I can't hear her answer, but I'm sure she knows better than to shoot dice with a telekinetic.

Eventually the alarm went off and I went downstairs. The Ace was indeed back; otherwise, you already know what didn't happen. Oh, and it was raining. Just what I wanted on my birthday: a scrub and a rinse.

Sunday morning, 0630. Here we all are again, with our drinks and my neuritis, caught again in a scheduled hold. But the backup computer has been brought into line—"We have *ways* of doing these things," says the Baron as only he can—and the fuel cells deny any knowledge of wrongdoing, so under Miranda-Escobedo we let them go.

"And if they scrub again today . . . ?" asks the Countess.

"They won't," the Space Ace says, and while he's just being typically Ace no one argues, not the Countess and certainly not me.

The Prof clears his throat as if to begin a lecture, but he's pointing his pipestem at the screen: the hold is over, the count is running, and we're cleared to go ("lift ship," as the Ace would say) at 0700. Whatever else anyone has to say is saved; even the television people are falling silent. The big fat lovely bird is in final countdown, and no one has anything further to add.

Motors light, yellow fire under the bird's tail. Fire hits water and flashes it to steam, a huge white cloud that rises to completely hide the shuttle—*why*, I think furiously, don't they change cameras, it could be tearing itself into tinsel behind that smokescreen—and then the nose of the tank appears, and the SRBs, and then the



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orbiter, and in two seconds more we've cleared the tower.

Then we get a side view, just in time to emphasize the angle of the bird's flop on its back—normal, normal, but who in the name of George Pal is running that switcher?

It doesn't matter. We're flying. (And maybe the director was frozen by the moment too.) "Go! *Go*—" that's me, and everyone else in the room, and in the TV studio, and on the beach, and everywhere the image reaches; I've been here on all these mornings since Alan Shepard, and the Chant of the Rising Bird is always the same. *"Go! Go!"* It's our Hallelujah Chorus, engineers and scientists and crazy writers and just plain joyful people. Even the Professor, whose left brain I know is ticking like a cesium clock, is whispering it with the rest of us, helping us push.

And though we've been parallel-staging boosters for years, still no one gets a lungful of air until the SRBs separate and fall free and clear (and through our long lens we actually see them break away, not at all like the animation). Then the bird's lost to even augmented sight, and there's a long pause as we wait to hear the tank has been dropped without mishap. Mishap? Mayhap. But nay, forsooth. I've been on bus rides more eventful than this . . . of course, when a bus crashes, the wardheelers don't demand that we spend highway subsidies on "social programs."

I look around the room at my metaphorical guests, who don't understand why we Earthlings would rather build freeways and fusion bombs than spaceships. Just for a moment, while the bird soared, the metaphors all turned solid . . . and I didn't understand it either.

The Baron unfolds from his midair lotus, his boots touching down softly, his cape gathered around him. He holds out his beer can, and we all tap our drinks against it, my coffee mug last of all.

"Welcome to the club," he says to me, and crunches the can down to an aluminum spindle. He opens his hand, and the twist of metal floats above his palm. Then, for one instant, I see it as something else: something stately and human-made, hanging in black space. And then it's gone, and so is the Baron. Metaphors will do that to you, sometimes.

The Ace gets up; he hates to be the last to leave. "Be seein' you in all the usual places," he says.

I shift the cushions under myself and say, "In a while, Ace."

"Not too long, huh? The Spaceport Bar ain't the same without you and Barry B."

"Don't get maudlin, Ace," says the Countess, which by rights



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should be my line—but I'm just the writer, what do I know? The Space Ace pulls on his gear, gives us all a salute.

I say, "You'll be back for the landing, won't you?"

"If I'm not flyin' chase at Mach Twenty," he says, and laughs, and walks out whistling one of the eighteen million Dorsai ballads. I make a note to watch for a chase plane that looks as if Harley-Davidson built it.

"Cheer up, minstrel," the Countess says, "you're flying." She gives me a kiss (come on now, you know you were waiting for that) and the scent of her hair is like mountain laurel and dimethyl hydrazine. She stands, dusting herself, checking her holsters, and looks for a place to smash her champagne glass. There isn't one. She tosses the glass upward, cross-draws a Hawkwood Arms DL9, and disintegrates the crystal in midair.

"The new lodgings have a fireplace," I say helpfully, watching a trace of glittering dust disperse.

"Oh, don't tell me you're getting romantic, minstrel. The Ace can talk like a Howard Hawks reject if he wants, but you're supposed to know what you're doing."

Just like her to say that. Howard Hawks indeed.

On the TV Arthur Clarke is plugging you-know-which magazine for the *n*th time. As the René Magritte-ish door on the beach opens up to starry sky, the Countess steps through it. Just like her.

Only the Professor and I are left. He's puffing at his pipe, playing with my calculator again. Distantly, as if not speaking to me at all, he says, "The tank, cold-brittled, ruptures . . . the solid boosters misburn . . . the tiles shatter . . . what's that old phrase, for fins peeling away on launch?"

"Strip tease," I say quietly.

"Do you want to know the odds of an abort-or-worse failure, given an STS launch every two weeks?"

"Never tell me the odds."

"That's the Ace's line, and you know it. The Space Ace can fix anything with bent wire and a ball-peen hammer. Can *they?*" He points skyward, since the television powers have decided the first spaceship in the world is less important than a cartoon.

"We fixed Skylab. And Apollo 13. And when the time comes—"

"Which it will."

"—we'll repair Shuttles in mid-mission. You know I'm right."

"And you know I'm right," the Prof says, and we both shut up, which is only slightly better than arguing.

After a moment I say, "It was a good launch."



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"Technically outstanding."

And with one voice we both say *"It was stinking beautiful!"* I rock back laughing—there is no pain—and the Prof stands up, laughing too. "One to transmit," he says into his pipe, and he begins to flicker, and then fades like the dream he always was.

And then I'm alone on the pad.

## ANSWER TO LUKE WARM AT FORTY BELOW (from page 66)

Minus forty is the only value at which the Fahrenheit scale intersects the Celsius (or centigrade) scale. In other words, minus forty on either scale exactly equals minus forty on the other!

Because 100 divisions on the Celsius scale equal 180 divisions on the Fahrenheit, each Fahrenheit degree is 5/9 as large as a Celsius degree. And zero Celsius, the temperature at which water freezes, is 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Knowing these facts, it is not hard to arrive at the following equation: $C = 5/9 (F - 32)$.

If $C = -40$, the equation gives F a value of –40. Incidentally, Luke's thermometer could not have operated with mercury because mercury freezes at –39 C.

You may have noticed that on Fahrenheit thermometers for taking your temperature there is a slight constriction in the tube that keeps the mercury from dropping down again until the thermometer is shaken. How come? If the mercury, when it expands, can go up through the constriction, why can't it go down when it contracts? And why will the reading drop for a moment if you plunge the thermometer in hot water?

Turn to page 85 for the answers.



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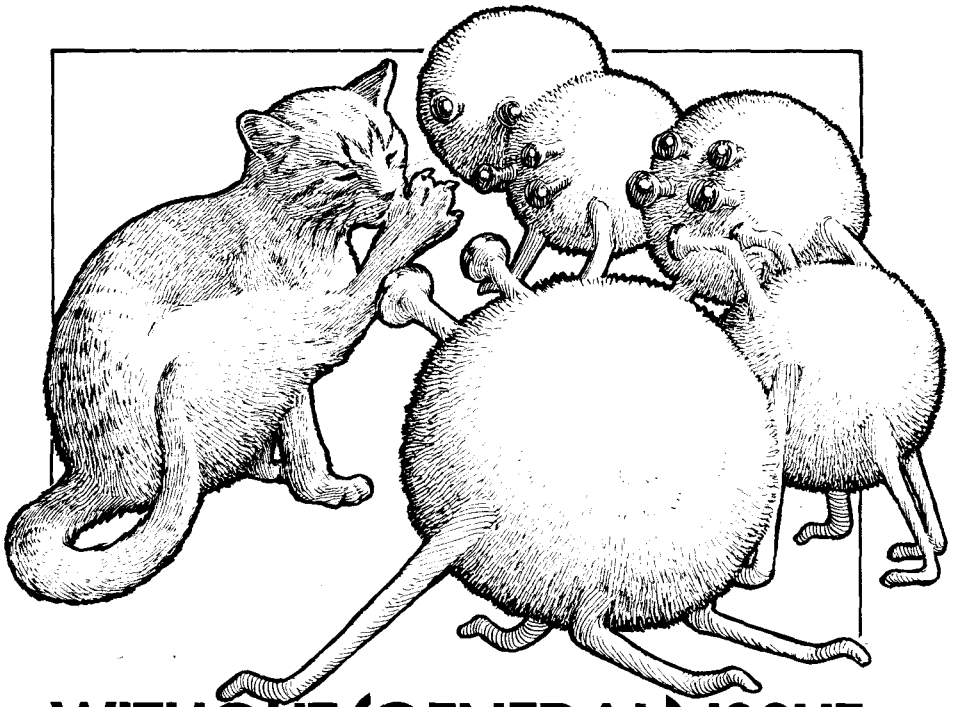

# WITHOUT (GENERAL) ISSUE

by Reg Bretnor

art: George Barr

*Mr. Bretnor has a Papa Schimmelhorn novel making the rounds, and has often claimed that he could write a pun quite as horrid as Mr. Briarton's Feghoots, if he but had the time.*

Gentlemen, you have summoned me to explain to your Committee why I, as Commander-in-Chief, absolutely will not permit women officers as members of Space Force First Contact Teams.

Very well, I shall tell you.

It goes back to when I was a new lieutenant, fresh out of the Academy, assigned to my first team. There were five of us: Captain Arkleigh, the C.O.; Jameson and Clavijo, both techs; myself; and



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Hildreth, our telepath. Then, of course, there was Hildreth's symbiote, a gray cat named Richelieu. As I'm sure you know, in those days we were forced to rely even more on telepaths than we are today; and they always relied partly on their animals. Cats and dogs are telepathically sensitive on primitive levels normally closed to humans, and they in turn can communicate what they sense to us, or at least to telepaths adequately trained.

Our probes had reported a fantastic mishmash of electronic emissions from the seventh planet of a star called *alpha*-Poronis—if you want, I can pinpoint it for you on the star charts.

That will not be necessary? Thank you, gentlemen.

Naturally, everybody at Headquarters was very excited because it was accepted that structured electronic activity on what had to be communications frequencies meant technological progress of a very high order, and our Team was ordered to go and introduce ourselves to the civilization producing it. We orbited the planet, which was astoundingly Earthlike—a 17.682 similarity factor, to put it in present-day terms—and sent in a lander. We had seen nothing to indicate that our new friends had achieved either space flight or space weaponry, but we kept electronic silence on their known frequencies as a precaution.

At any rate, nobody bothered the lander; and for some days it kept sending us its pictures, reports, and analyses. It had come down on what I can only describe as a meadow, even if the grass wasn't really grass as we know it, and the surrounding trees weren't really trees. You know how extraterrestrial vegetation usually differs from ours, just strange enough to be subtly disturbing. But there was nothing—absolutely nothing—dangerous to man. The air was breathable; the bacteria were too alien to affect us; there was no sign of predators or anything poisonous; several of the vegetable growths analyzed by the lander actually turned out to be "probably edible." The only living creatures observed were spheroid. They looked like grayish-green puffballs, and they moved by just rolling around, pushing themselves with small anatomical jets—just farting along, if you'll forgive my use of the term. But that wasn't all they could do. They were able to extrude usable tentacles, stand up on them, manipulate objects and, so it appeared, each other. They were also able to extrude what I can only call eye-things, in clusters of two to a dozen. They differed in size from eight or ten inches to about three to four feet, and they were busy as bird dogs, rolling, and getting up on their tentacles, and dancing around to touch each other. Not only that, but some distance away the lander's cameras showed us definite structures, with what seemed to be woven roofs



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and transparent mesh walls.

There was no doubt about it. They were intelligent, and they seemed to be more or less civilized. Arkleigh gave the order, and we went down, hovering just long enough to get the lay of the land. At one end of the meadow, there was a wide stream, and it was so pretty that he decided to set down beside it. Had it not been for the much-too-green sky, the place would have looked just like home.

From then on, we went by the book. The puffballs looked up as we landed, eyed us for a moment or two, and went back to what they'd been doing. Obviously, they didn't take our vessel for a Chariot of the Gods out of space.

"All right," Arkleigh said. "Hildreth, let Richelieu out."

We were all anxious to see what would happen, and we had our noses glued to the ports as Hildreth opened the hatch and let down the catwalk.

Richelieu took a good, hearty sniff of the nice, clean alien air, hoisted his tail, let out an exuberant *Meow!* and walked out majestically. Twenty feet from the catwalk he paused, surveying the scene.

Now, abruptly, everything changed. The puffballs stopped simultaneously. All together, they extruded their eye-things. They stood up on their tentacles. All together, they danced forward, forming a semi-circle around us. They were all looking at Richelieu.

"Getting anything, Hildreth?" asked Arkleigh.

"Sir," Hildreth whispered excitedly. "They—they're *admiring* him. Watch him! He knows it. Cats love admiration—"

Delicately, Richelieu lifted a paw, stuck out his pink tongue, and started to wash.

"No doubt about it?"

"None, sir. None at all. I can almost feel it myself."

"Then out you go!" Arkleigh told him.

Richelieu broke off washing. He had seen that the banks of the stream were sandy, and he hadn't had a chance to dig into fresh sand since our takeoff. He stalked over to it, sniffed, dug his hole, squatted over it, did his business, filled the hole in enthusiastically, and took a long drink of the water.

In the meantime, Hildreth had followed him out.

"Can *you* contact them?" Arkleigh called to him.

"Sir, I've been trying to, but they pay no attention. I'm pretty sure they aren't telepathic. But I'm getting impressions from *them*. Not very clear ones. It's about like trying to read the mind of a porpoise. But they're aware of me, and—well, they admire me too. They think



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I'm wonderful!"

"Better be careful, Joe!" Clavijo called out. "They'll be forming a fan club."

"Shut up!" Arkleigh told him. "Hildreth, do you get any danger signals—anger, fear, hunger, hostility?"

"None at all, sir."

Well, gentlemen, again we went by the book. We all filed out. After all, we had sidearms.

We lined up next to Hildreth, and Arkleigh stepped forward.

"Take me to your leader!" whispered Clavijo, and the Captain told him again to shut up.

The puffballs were coming closer and closer, holding each other's tentacles like a ring of schoolgirls holding hands—closer and closer—

"Still no hostility?" Arkleigh asked anxiously.

"Absolutely not!" Hildreth told him.

And that's when it happened.

Gentlemen, this has been classified **Top Secret** ever since, and I trust that no word of it will get beyond this Committee. All I felt was an infinitesimal instant of unendurable tension—and the next thing I knew I was lying on my back—on my *bare* back, gentlemen—and my head felt like a bursting balloon. Slowly, I made myself look around. We were all on our backs, Captain Arkleigh, and Jameson and Clavijo, and I, and Hildreth. And we were all naked—all except Richelieu, who at least still had his fur coat on.

Jameson looked at me with one bloodshot eye. "Bill," he gasped, "wh-what *happened?* Where *are* we?"

I looked around. We were lying in the middle of what was only too clearly a cage of some sort of translucent fibers, roofed with a similar stuff closely woven. The cage was about twenty by thirty, or perhaps a bit more, and one corner of it was occupied by an eight-foot-square sandbox. It was surrounded by a whole crowd of puffballs, all standing up on their tentacles and pushing in for a really good look.

*"Where are we?"* Jameson repeated hysterically.

"I think," I told him, "we've landed in what the locals use for a zoo."

Gentlemen, we were there *for more than two years.* In the back wall of the cage, they'd put a crawl-through door that led into a sort of cave, but it was kept closed during business hours, so our only privacy was at night. Of course, at first we did our best to com-



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municate with our captors, but it was utterly useless. They used no verbal symbols. They used no visual symbols. We concluded that they were living computers, living electronic devices. They chattered by touching tentacles or by using whatever passed for their CB bands. But when we tried to get through to them by scratching a Pythagorean theorem on the floor of the cage, or demonstrating our knowledge of Universal Mathematical Truths, all they did was hold up the tinier puffballs so they could see better.

Of course, we tried to escape—but we soon learned our lesson. When we put any strain on those fibers—any at all—we got another jolt of whatever had knocked us out the first time. They fed us—not too badly if you like strange raw vegetables and occasionally raw fish from the river—there seem to be fish everywhere—and they gave us plenty of fresh water and cleaned the sandbox out every night. And, gentlemen, how would *you* like to use a goddam catbox for your sanitary purposes, especially with a few hundred puffballs watching you with their unwinking eyes? Because Richelieu had been first out, they must have taken him for our leader and assumed we'd all do as he did.

It may seem funny to you here and now, but it sure as hell wasn't funny to us. We could see our spaceship, untouched in the distance, and Hildreth didn't make things any better by assuring us that the puffballs simply *adored* us—I guess like kids adore the monkey-islands in our own zoos.

I will say Hildreth never gave up. He kept right on trying to get through to them, and doing his best to catch what they were thinking, but all he could ever latch onto were bits of what he called parallel emotions, like a sort of fondness for each other and their littler puffballs, and that stupid business about how they loved us.

How did we pass the time? Gentlemen, we told stories. We made up games, as well as we could without so much as a scrap of paper or a stick or a stone. We gave each other IQ tests. We shared our knowledge of this and that, or did our best to. And we were *bored*—bored almost to extinction. We tried hard to keep up our spirits and each other's. Catbox and all, with hair to our shoulders and beards to our middles, we still tried to maintain man's dignity. But more and more often we found dark despair overwhelming us. The only reason none of us tried to commit suicide was because there was nothing to do it with.

Then one morning we came out of our cave, and without warning they zapped us again, and when we came to we were back in the meadow. They had dressed us as well as they could. They had given



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us back all our equipment. And they had formed their semi-circle around us just as they had when we landed.

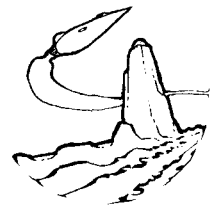
We did not say goodbye. As fast as we could, we followed Richelieu back into the ship, and—hardly being able to wait to get at our razors—battened down all the hatches and took off.

*What* was that, Senator? What does all this have to do with my refusing to allow women on First Contact missions?

The answer is *everything*. Hildreth was able to tell us why the puffballs had let us go free. As I said, their emotions were just enough like our own for him to perceive them.

They had let us go free because they were sorry for us. They had concluded that we were awfully unhappy because we refused to breed in captivity.

My God, gentlemen, don't you realize that if we'd had women aboard we'd still *be* there?



## SECOND ANSWER TO LUKE WARM AT FORTY BELOW
## (from page 79)

The constriction is so small that mercury cannot get through unless pushed by a strong force, such as the force created by pressure when it expands. When the mercury cools, it breaks at the constriction into two parts. Only inertia, produced by vigorous shaking, will force the upper part down again.

When the thermometer is put in hot water (not *too* hot, or it might break!) the glass expands before the mercury. This enlarges the channel enough to allow the mercury in the upper part to go down a trifle.

Now for those who enjoy word play, what temperature (on either scale) is represented by the following rebus?

BABS/0

The answer is on page 123.



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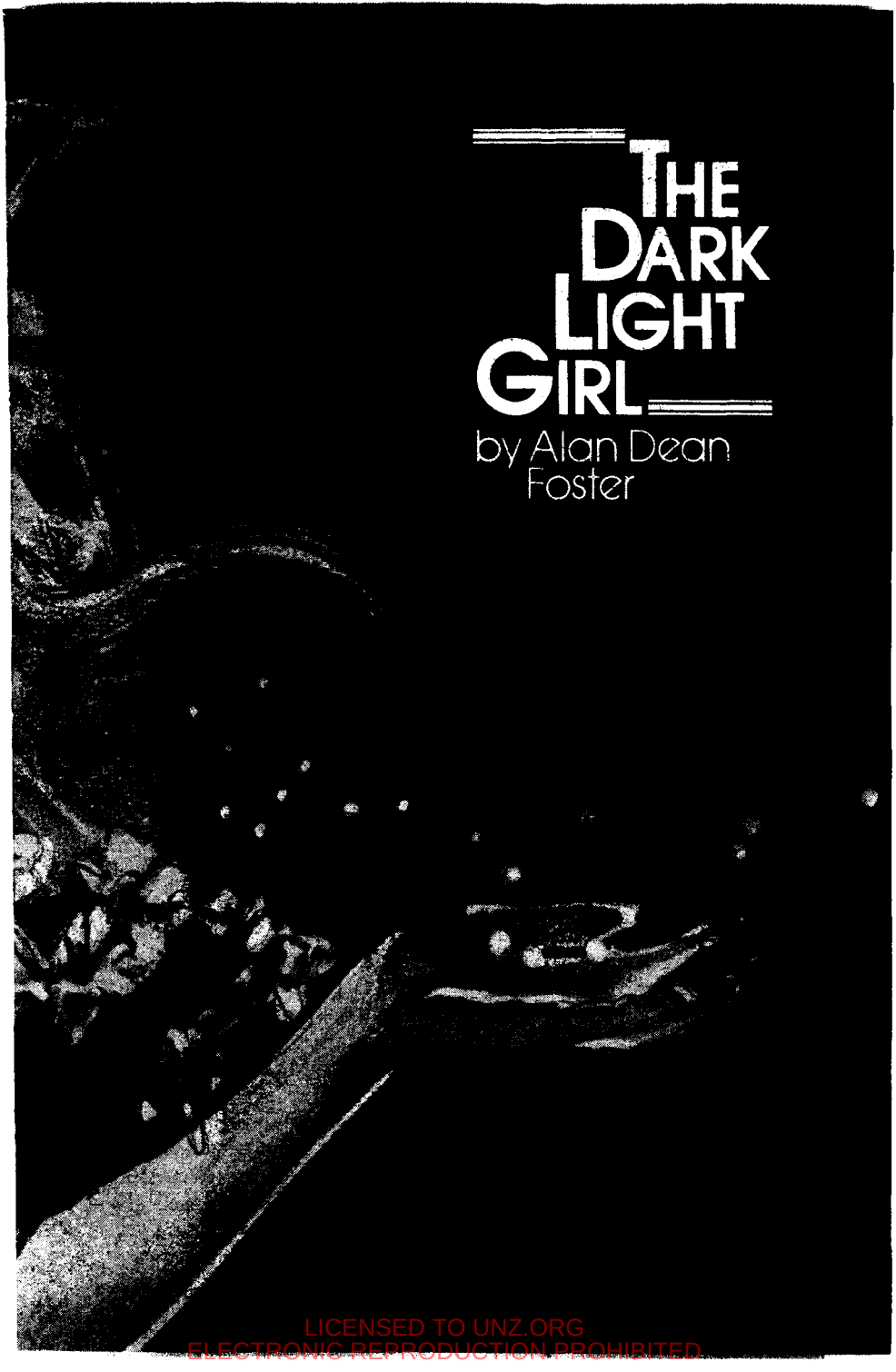

# THE DARK LIGHT GIRL

by Alan Dean Foster

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*The author reports that he has become almost too well known for that strange art, the novelization of science fiction and fantasy screen-plays:* Outland, Clash of the Titans, *and the latest re-make of* The Thing *are his most recent projects .He has just finished a long fantasy novel of his own,* Spellsinger, *and is at work on* The Man Who Used the Universe.

Wells didn't want to lose the tire. But he'd argued with rough road and, as usual, the road had won. Now one-fourth of his car's support was a dead rubber doughnut baking in the sun outside the old Chevron station. A thin young man coated with grease, blue-jeans, and fading acne was rotating the tire in a tank of water. The dark grease on his arms gleamed in the failing New Mexico light.

"It's all torn up, mister. Not just a puncture. See?" Wells noted the bubbles gurgling from the submerged tread.

"I see. So, what would you suggest?"

The youth rose. He'd been genuinely sympathetic ever since Wells had limped in. Friendly, small-town mechanic. At least I know he's not trying to shaft me, Wells thought. The hole in the tire was big enough to drive a rat through. He wondered what kind of transmission you'd put in a rat.

Damn but it's hot, this country. Even at five.

"I can get you a new one out of Carrizozo tomorrow," was the helpful reply. "I'd go now, but it's getting on closing time and I'm the only one here. Mr. Ordway's gone up to Santa Fé to visit his sister."

"Then it looks like I'll be spending the night here." Wells couldn't afford the towing charge all the way into Carrizozo, even if he could find a truck willing to undertake the round trip this late on a Friday.

He studied the cluster of small homes and shops whose outlines rippled in the setting sun. That unrelenting antagonist was at last beginning to fall behind the broken teeth of the Malpais peaks.

"Is there a motel in town?"

"Yes, sir." The mechanic turned, self-consciously wiping his hands on a rag greasier than his palms. He pointed northward. "Go up the highway a block . . . it's a short block," he added, mindful perhaps of Wells's city accent, "and turn right on B Street. The Mescalero's two blocks east. Cafe of the same name right next to it."

"That a good place to eat?"



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"That's the only place to eat, unless you feel like hiking a mile south to the Stuckey's."

"Thanks. I guess that's it, then." Wells made a face, aimed a desultory kick at the hapless tire. "What time tomorrow?"

The mechanic shrugged. "Can't say for sure. Depends on when Mr. Ordway gets back. I can't close the station."

"Yeah. I understand. Get me a Goodrich if you can. And thanks." He turned away from the mechanic's polite, "You're welcome," and started up the blacktop.

The last edge of the receding sun had turned bloody when he made the turn off the highway. B Street was paved, flanked with neat little houses. Tile roofs and stucco walls, cactus in the front yard, separate garage in back. There were no fences. Wells revised his accident-inspired opinion of the nowhere town slightly upward. He'd spent time in far worse places.

Of course, you *had* to deviate from the Interstate, he reminded himself gloomily. L.A.–Dallas isn't a long enough drive, you had to make it longer. You wanted to explore the back country, visit the unseen and untouched.

There were reasons why Agua Caliente was unseen and untouched. It had nothing to boast of except isolation, a common commodity in the American West. He wondered where the hot springs were that must have given the town its name. There were always hot springs.

A tarantula scuttled across his path, advancing in fits and starts like an advertising accountant in rush hour traffic. It paused briefly to confront him, raising up on its hind legs and threatening with those in front. Wells detoured carefully around it. There were no tarantulas in West Los Angeles. The hirsute arachnid was as alien to him as a visitor from Pluto. The spider raised no cry of victory at its minor triumph, simply turned and resumed its patrol.

The Mescalero Motel was a train of individual cottages paralleling the small creek that separated town from hillside. At the head of the train was a somewhat larger building.

CAFE. BUD. EATS. Cafebudeats. An old Afrikaans term, he told himself, applied to the simpler cuisine of the American road by a visiting semanticist from Cape Town U. Which I am not.

What I am is hungry. Wells let the screen door clatter shut behind him.

There were two booths and three tables and all were empty. A couple of local monuments, both ancient, one bearded, sat chattering to each other at the counter. Wells told himself they doubtless ren-



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dezvoused here every day, were as much a part of the decor as the naugahyde upholstery and the stained mirror over the coffee and milkshake mixers. Only a retired man in a small western town could nurse a single cup of coffee through an eight-hour day.

He slid into one of the booths, picked up the menu sandwiched between the salt and pepper shakers and the sugar bowl. Mexican special-special-special $3.95 with chips, it proclaimed to an indifferent world. That he would ignore. On the off chance the patty melt might once have passed close by a steer he ordered it from the moon-faced waitress.

"Thank you, sir." Big smile, genuine. Small towns, he told himself. Sirs and thank yous. Fresh air and faces.

The coffee fossilizers ignored him, and the waitress disappeared through the swinging door into the distant kitchen. Wells was left to stare out the window.

Like the motel cabins the cafe snuggled up against the creek and foothills. Rushes, weeds, and would-be cottonwoods marked the course of meandering melt water. As Wells watched, a mother skunk and four young materialized from the brush to drink. Wells had never seen a skunk outside of a zoo or bad cartoons. The mother watched while the kittens drank. Then they filtered back into the brush.

The patty melt was a pleasant surprise, the beef apparently devoid of soy, that omnipresent despoiler of the American fast food dream. He enjoyed it, and the french fries, and the iced tea that was brewed from tea leaves instead of reconstituted rust.

The elderly lady who managed the motel smilingly accepted his American Express, plastic peonage having penetrated even to this biblically obscure hamlet. She showed him to his cabin.

"You'll have plenty of privacy, Mr. Wells," she assured him. "You're all by yourself. We don't get many visitors this time of year." She peered meaningfully behind him. "Do you have a car?"

"Blew a tire on my way in. It's at the Chevron station. They have to fetch a replacement from Carrizozo."

"Oh yes. Michael is all by himself now, since Harry Ordway went up to Santa Fé to see his sister. She's not well, you know. Michael's a good boy, Mr. Wells. He'll bring your new tire first thing in the morning."

The double bed was clean, the sheets smelling of lemon. There was soap in the bathroom. With the back window open he could hear the faint song of the creek.

"Good night, Mr. Wells. Sleep tight."



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"Thank you, Mrs. Appleton. See you in the morning."

He lay awake out of habit, gazing at the black and white TV. The offerings of the single channel soon paled, but he couldn't fall asleep. It was too quiet. The creek tried, but it was no match for the traffic that flowed past his Santa Monica apartment.

Something else made a noise outside the window. Gravel disturbed, bushes irritated. Too large for a skunk, he thought. He swung his naked legs off the bed and crept toward the window. With luck he might see a peccary, or even a cougar come down out of the hills to drink. That would be worth seeing. The moon was half full. It painted the rocks a weak silver.

The sound was repeated, mixed this time with laughter. Wells grimaced and turned for the bed. Of course, he reminded himself, it's Friday night. The local kids can stay up late. If they made too much noise he could always report it to the manager. He didn't want to wake the nice Mrs. Appleton, though.

Something caught his eye. He turned back to the window, and got very cold. A girl was running along the dry, opposite bank of the creek bed. Occasionally she would glance back over her shoulder and try to stifle a giggle. She was wearing a simple white dress and sandals. Her blonde curls fluttered with each little jump she took. Her complexion was pale as incoming fog. She was truly beautiful, not *Vogue* fake or *Cosmo* creepy, but as beautiful and pale as the white gypsum sands of the national monument to the south.

And she glowed like a torch.

It was an ethereal greenish-yellow, sunlight stained with tincture of lime, at once insubstantial and powerfully real. It did not emanate from her clothing or some powerful compact lantern concealed in a pocket. It radiated forth from her cheeks, her exposed legs and ankles, from the tips of her fingers, even from her hair.

Not a ghost, Wells tried to reassure himelf with frightening calm. Not a ghost, no, no, not in sandals and polyester, not here between Oscura and Carrizozo just off New Mexico State Highway 54. His chest hurt, reminding him to breathe.

He leaned into the window screen, the mesh scratching his nose as he strained to follow the running apparition's progress. His heart pounded and his fingers dug hurtfully into the sill. He wanted that vision. Oh, how he wanted her!

Then she was gone beyond the turn in the creek, her giggling mixing with its watery own. A faint glow showed above the rocks after the image had passed. It rose and dipped like a searchlight. Then it, too, had vanished.



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Slowly he returned to the bed. He squeezed his eyes tight until tears came. He was not dreaming, not asleep. His name was Haskell Wells. He was twenty-eight, on his way from Los Angeles to Dallas to switch to the *Times* subsidiary paper there. He'd just blown a tire, eaten a patty melt, seen a tarantula, a skunk, and a ghost. Around three o'clock fatigue finally overpowered incredulity and he fell asleep.

In the morning certitude cracked. But not completely. He was a reporter, a trained observer. Too much remained clear in his memory. The glow, the beauty, the pulsing desire that had nearly overwhelmed him lingered as his fork did over breakfast.

Something in his expression brought forth concern from the waitress. "Something wrong, mister?"

"Umm?" He looked up from his eggs. They were getting cold. Around him, other locals were finishing their meals. Small town, early risers, he told himself. "It's nothing. I think." He grinned, forked egg into his mouth. "I think I saw a ghost last night."

"A ghost?" She smiled, but it seemed to require a conscious effort. Wells picked up on it instantly. "Here? In Agua Cal?"

He nodded. "Right out back of my cabin. A girl. She was wearing sandals and a white dress and had shoulder-length blonde hair and she glowed like St. Elmo's Fire. A ghost."

The waitress's smile petrified. Wells moved food around on his plate and tried not to appear interested.

"We don't have any ghosts around here, mister," she told him too quickly. "If we did, they'd most likely be Apaches. It's their souls that're layin' all over these mountains."

"This was no Apache." He nibbled his toast. "Cheerleader, maybe. I don't think blondes were common among the Mescaleros."

"Then you didn't see nothing, like as not," she said with finality. "Eggs okay, *then*?"

"Perfect. Thanks."

She nodded. "You want anything else, just ask." She left him to take an order from a newly arrived couple seated at the table nearest the counter. Wells decided it must have been quite an order, because she talked to them for a long time. After she left, the middle-aged woman at the table glanced hurriedly toward Wells's booth, looked away fast when he chose to glance back.

There seemed to be a lot of interest in Agua Cal in something that wasn't. Wells was a good reporter. Had the ol' nose for news, as they said. What tickled his senses in the little dining room wasn't Chanel No. 5.



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"Pretty here," he told the mechanic later. "Take your time with that tire. I've got a long way to go and I'm kind of enjoying the rest, even if it wasn't planned. I think I'll take the day off and leave tomorrow morning. It's supposed to be cooler tomorrow anyway."

"That's what the weatherman on Channel Six said last night," the mechanic agreed. "Glad you're having a nice time." He watched for a while as Wells walked back toward the motel.

Wells went through the motions of a man preparing for bed. He undressed, brushed his teeth, took a shower, watched the sun go down, spent a couple of hours eying the icons of the tube, then rolled over and turned out the light. He lay motionless for two hours, until ten P.M. It was Saturday night.

At ten he slipped from beneath the covers and dressed on the floor. Then he leaned close to the open back window and settled down to wait. He waited and watched until his eyelids drooped. Midnight. The witching hour, but neither witches nor ghosts materialized. He saw a snake and mother skunk with her brood. Once an owl skimmed low over the creek bed, struck and failed, soared away hooting disappointment at the moon over a near mice miss.

But no wondrous dryad came floating along the water's edge.

At two o'clock he made a decision. The old screen moved aside easily, quietly. He slipped over the window's edge and dropped to the gravel behind the cabin.

The ghost had moved from south to north. He started south, using the brush for cover and crossing the meter-wide rivulet in a single leap. Jump-ups and stick-me-tights and grass burrs decorated the hems of his pants' legs, pricked him through his socks. He fought them with terse, soft curses but did not stop to pick them off.

He walked for at least an hour. No one confronted him. The sole confrontation took place in his own, increasingly confused mind. He *was* on a long drive, alone. It was very hot, the landscape monotonous, dulling. The only thing that kept him going was the certain knowledge that had his imaginative brain chosen to conjure up a spirit it would not have taken the oh-so-prosaic form of an exquisite teenage blonde wearing a dress from Sears Roebuck.

He stopped to check his watch. Four in the morning. Soon the sun would be up and he'd have nothing to show for his nocturnal excursion save a wasted night's sleep. That would mean he'd have to catch up by staying over yet another day. All because of a momentary aberration.

Well, screw it. Spirits, however lovely, were not a part of real life. Getting to work on time in Dallas was. He kicked angrily at the



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gravel because he couldn't kick himself and started back toward the motel. He had a long hike ahead.

That's when he heard the music.

It was barely audible at first, rising and falling in regular cadence. It did not come from town. Turning a slow circle, he hunted with his ears, trying to pinpoint it. Kangaroo rats watched his pirouette without comment.

The music came from the east, from above. He started climbing.

The steep hill gave him no trouble, nor did the higher one beyond it. All those hours spent in the frenzied organized combat of the racquetball club were paying dividends. He neared the crest of the second hill. The music was much louder. He found he was sweating, not entirely from the climb. Then he was staring over the johnson grass and low scrub that fringed the ridge.

Below and beyond lay a depression with a flat floor of crushed rock. Most of the fragments were the size of his fist. The pulverized stone crawled up the far side of the little valley. A dark gap showed in the side of the mountain where the material ended. It looked like something had cut into the slope with a giant meat cleaver.

And *she* was there. The boy she danced wildly with had red hair cropped close, big ears and freckles. He wore jeans and sneakers and a sweatshirt and glowed like a giant screen television against the red and gray rocks.

They whirled 'round each other, twisting like flames in the hand of a Samoan fire-knife twirler, two pale green suns revolving about a common center, a bipedal binary. The bright, pulsating glow was especially intense where they held hands.

Five other couples cavorted atop the rocky stage, an insipid if somehow threatening setting for so spectacular a display of the unnatural. All twelve radiated that brilliant green-yellow glow. They formed a living Fourth-of-July pinwheel in the starry night, a vortex of light and youthful laughter.

Twelve of them, Wells thought. Twelve ghosts dancing not on the head of a pin (or was that angels?) but a scalped hillside. His throat was as dry as the nearby Tularosa Basin. He made no notes, uttered no sound louder than the beat of his heart, simply stared and tried to believe.

They seemed so real, these playful young supernaturals. They were too alive, too lovely to be phosphorescent zombies, dervishing about a rockpile not a hundred miles from Albuquerque. Yet his eyes registered and his brain interpreted.

There was not an unattractive one among the celebrants, though



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none matched the preternatural beauty of his delicate blonde. Six Aphrodites partnered with half a dozen young Apollos. They radiated health and vitality and attractiveness as they glowed green-yellow bright. Wells found himself leaning through the brush. His gaze was locked unbreakably on the spinning siren, the carnal blonde of the green fire. He could feel her burning body against his own, taste her half-parted lips, see himself drowning in the essence of her.

And yet there was something wrong with the bacchanale. It was the music they danced to. The music did not fit such a gathering, did not seem appropriate for a coven of mystical celebrants.

The music of the moment was the Rolling Stones doing "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." When that song ended the same group segued into "Brown Sugar." Wells recognized the tape, though he couldn't see where the machine was sitting. His feverish brain shunted aside the relentlessly electric music. There was nothing, nothing here, nothing for him save those pale thighs and that taunting, teasing face, drawing him toward her, pulling him irresistibly downward.

"We don't want to hurt you, mister. We just want to talk to you."

Something hard and unyielding was pressed against Wells's spine. He turned.

Three men stood behind him. Two looked to be in their early forties. The third was considerably older. His expression was sorrowful in the moonlight.

"I'm Charlie Zimmer," said the man holding the shotgun against Wells' back. "I really wouldn't want to have to shoot you, mister." The gun moved significantly. "A twelve-gauge can make an awful mess of somebody at this range. Ain't no reason for it, if you'll just take a moment to listen."

"I will be sensible." Wells spoke with conviction. But he was still trying to watch the dancers. They had not vanished into the nether regions with the arrival of the other men. The newcomers could surely see them, yet they displayed no surprise at the eerie, luminous presences whirling to the music on the rocks below.

The second man wore a western hat and picked at an ear as he spoke to the elder. "Where you want to do this, doc?"

"Motel's fine. Nobody'll bother us with questions. Reena knows, I suspect." He turned to the reporter, extended a hand. "My name's Sal Withers. Town doctor." Wells shook hands. The shotgun had not strayed.

"Wish I could say I was pleased to meet you, Doctor."

The older man grinned pleasantly. "Maybe we can remedy that."



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Wells looked back down at the ghosts. They continued their dancing, remained in his sight. The blonde was especially close now, her legs flaring, her hair alive with light. She was unquestionably the most exquisite, most desirable creature he'd ever imagined. His desire blotted out everything else; the unreality of the moment, the three quiet men, the shotgun. He found himself reaching out for her, reaching out for the light, wanting, wanting . . .

"Watch it, Charlie! He's going over!"

Wells stumbled down the slope toward the dancers. As he neared them his vision blurred with the closeness of the beauty that had to be his, that cried out for him to possess. *She* turned to face him, gaped. The dancing stopped, though the raucous Stones continued to howl in his ears.

The blonde's partner stepped protectively in front of her, glowing brightly against the rock. Wells raised a fist to strike wildly at the Adonis.

Then he recognized the pimply face of the mechanic Michael beneath the flickering, compelling glow; and the shock slowed him. Something dented the back of his skull. . . .

He awoke in bed in his cabin. The three men sat at a table nearby. They were playing cards. A fourth voice announced, "He's awake again." Wells stared as the manager moved away from the side of his bed and spoke to the elder. "I'll leave you now, Doc."

"Thanks, Reena." She closed the door behind her as the three men put down their cards and moved toward the bed. One traded three deuces and a pair of jacks for the twelve-gauge, cradled it loosely under an arm. Not loosely enough, Wells quickly decided. Besides, his car was still back at the garage.

He put a hand to the back of his head. There was a damp washcloth resting there, clammy and cold. No hole, though. And he couldn't recall the echo of a shot.

The doctor gestured at the man cradling the gun. "Charlie caught up to you before you reached Jolene." He sounded apologetic. "He tried not to hit you too hard."

"Jolene . . . the ghost?" Wells remembered the vision that had danced before him on the rocks, the desire that had overwhelmed him, the mad charge down the slope.

The third man shook his head. "Nope. Jolene's m' daughter."

Wells raised himself slowly, rested his back against the iron bedstead. "That's crazy. If ever I saw a ghost, she was it. And she was dancing with eleven cousins." He frowned, suddenly remembering



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the young mechanic.

The men listened, exchanged looks. "He means Mike Billings, Jim Billings's boy," said the one called Charlie.

The oldster sat down on the end of the bed. "They are not ghosts, Mr. Wells. They're luciferites."

Wells's gaze traveled to the implied threat of the shotgun. He remembered stories he'd read and discarded as tripe; small towns filled with isolated cults and populated by religious fanatics who look just like Uncle Ed and Aunt Erma. Relatives of Rosemary's Baby. Any second now they'd calmly be explaining to him why they needed his heart for the monthly sacrifice. He debated whether he ought to try jumping the man holding the gun.

They reacted to the sudden expression of fear that came over his face. It was not, however, the kind of reaction he expected. They were laughing at him. Charlie extended a cigarette.

"Now Charlie, you know I don't approve of that," said the doctor.

"Aw hell, Doc. This poor fella's had a night of it. Give him a break."

Wells's hesitation faded. He accepted the cigarette and matches gratefully. "Yeah, gimme a break. And an explanation. I saw twelve ghosts. You say they're not." He broke three matches before getting the cigarette lit.

Doc Withers gathered his thoughts. "Do you know where you are?"

Wells frowned. "Agua Caliente, New Mexico."

"Near where?"

"I don't see what . . . ?"

"You want explanations?" Wells nodded. "Near where," the doctor repeated patiently.

Wells tried to remember the road map. "Oscura and Carrizozo, State Highway Fifty-Four. White Sands National Monument. Alamogordo. Rubirosa. Interstate Forty to the north, Ten to the south."

Withers nodded slowly. "White Sands. Alamogordo. Those mean anything to you?"

"Yeah. National Monument and . . ." His voice trailed away.

The doctor smiled grimly up at his companions. "I think this may be okay. He's educated." He turned his attention back to Wells. "Have you ever heard of luciferin?"

The reporter shook his head. White Sands. Alamogordo. 1945. Glowing. His brain was racing, trying to catch up, two steps behind information and implication.

Withers rose, paced as he continued talking. His gray hair was peeling back from his forehead. Outside, the June sun was shining



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brightly. He did not strike Wells as a man concealing a sinister secret.

"I've lived here most of my life. Set up practice here after the end of the war. I like being a country doctor, the easy pace, the people. I didn't know about the tests until the fifties. Nobody did who wasn't directly involved with the project. But I learned later on, like the rest of the folks in this region did. We're isolated here, but we're not hicks.

"Tillis's boy Jeremy was the first." The man standing next to Charlie nodded once. "Jeremy's twenty-three now. He's the oldest. The others showed up in turn."

"Others." Wells was staring at the somber-faced Tillis. "Other luciferites."

"That's what we call 'em." The doctor glanced back at his companions. "See, I told you he was smart."

Not too smart for my own good, I hope, Wells told himself worriedly. But he was starting to relax slightly, despite the presence of the shotgun. These men weren't acting or talking like devotees of Satan.

"What the hell is a luciferite?"

"Everyone has a certain amount of luciferin in their body," Withers explained. "Usually minute amounts. Not enough to amount to anything. And even smaller amounts of luciferase. A few creatures have substantial amounts in their bodies. Especially fireflies."

Cause and effect came crashing together in Wells's mind.

"Bombs weren't the only things they were testing back in' 45," Withers went on. "There was also a lot of talk about how nuclear medicine was going to revolutionize treatment of everything from cancer to warts. Took them a while to learn that trying to cure ancient diseases by dumping a load of isotopes on them might do more harm than good.

"Remember that rocky flat you saw the kids dancing on?" Wells nodded. "That's an old chemical dump site. Hundreds of them around the country. This one's sort of unique, I expect, because it received more than your usual loads of PCBs and insecticides. The folks at Alamogordo were playing around with some interesting chemical combinations pretty much free of supervision, until the government closed them down after the war." He shook his head slowly. "What some folks won't do to try and hide their mistakes. Not to mention dirty linen.

"That dump lies above the river that feeds the town reservoir. Over the years, stuff's been seeping into the town water supply a



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little at a time. Nobody noticed anything at first. It took three generations before the build-up reached the point where it began to affect children's body chemistry.

"It doesn't show up until puberty, reaches full strength by the age of sixteen. I try, but I haven't the facilities for isolating the enzymatic combination that's responsible. It doesn't seem to have any overt harmful effects, only interesting side effects. I'm sure the change in the chemicals released into the body at puberty has something to do with it."

Wells was no longer frightened, only fascinated. "To do with what? What effects are you talking about?"

"Hugely increased production of luciferin in the body, matched by a corresponding increase in the amount of luciferase. The latter's an enzyme itself. When it's present it permits oxidization of the luciferin, and you get . . ."

"Fireflies," Wells whispered wonderingly. He thought a moment, then spoke sharply to the doctor. "Why haven't you reported this? Why hasn't anyone been . . . ?"

" 'Scuse me, mister." Charlie smiled dolefully down at him. "It's our kids." His expression was taut, his words a plea for understanding. "Doc here says there's no signs of anything really harmful in them. No . . . no cancer or anything like that."

"Except for the luciferite effect they're perfectly normal adolescents," agreed Withers.

"See," Charlie continued, his fingers moving nervously, "we love our kids. Doc here says that if news of what's happened to them got out, well, the government might take 'em away from Agua Cal. Take 'em away from us. To study 'em."

"Our children like it here," Withers went on. "They don't want to be studied. They've all been to school or go there now. They know the fate of bugs under microscopes.

"They can control the effect, conceal it from outsiders. Usually they keep to their special places, where they can show off for each other in safety. It was bad luck you happened to see Jolene Lytton that night. We'd hoped you might forget it."

"You're only a country GP," Wells said evenly. "The effect *could* be harmful. There could be side effects."

"If any one of the kids shows any signs of ill effect, we'll have to submit them to hospital care and take our chances," said Withers. "But so far that hasn't been necessary. I check them regularly. I've taught them how to check themselves. They understand. They like what they've become, Mr. Wells. They don't want to be cured.



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"And there's another reason for keeping their ability hidden from outsiders. We here in Agua Caliente have a hard enough time dealing with it. We leave them alone, don't go up to watch their games and dances. We don't go watch them because if you do, you can lose control of yourself."

"You ought to know about that by now, mister," said Tillis.

Wells thought back to last night, to the sight of the spinning, flashing beauty and the effect she had upon him. He remembered his intense, overpowering urge to possess her, to take her to him. Lose control, yes, and he'd lose it again if given the chance.

"I know what you're feeling," Withers told him. "I'm no more immune to the effect than you are. In order to cope with it you have to understand it for what it is." He moved toward the door. "Jolene, you can come in now."

Wells tensed, his gaze shifting to the doorway. His loins throbbed in expectation, his muscles contorted. A girl came in. *The* girl. The vision, except . . .

Except she was not the vision, though she was undeniably the girl. His desire vanished instantly. She smiled shyly at him, a pretty but in no way extraordinary nineteen-year-old. Same hair, same dress, but something missing. The power, the compulsion, was gone along with the light.

"Thank you, Jolene. You can leave now."

"Yes, Doc." As she exited, a faint, brief flash of green-yellow light emanated from her body. Wells blinked. Then she was gone. He turned a dazed expression to Withers.

"I know, son. You see, it's the luciferite effect, the special light, that makes them all seem so beautiful. It's a dangerous thing, one they're just learning to keep under cover. For their own good." For a second his kindly demeanor seemed swamped by something unpleasant and primal. He shook it off, was once again the kindly country physician.

"That's why our children's secret must be kept, Mr. Wells. That's why they have to keep their lights hidden from the rest of the world. Not even the most jaded scientist, the most dedicated researcher could resist it. The beauty they can surround themselves with could mean their deaths. There is such a thing as being able to make yourself *too* attractive." He started for the door. Tillis and Charlie joined him.

"I think you understand, young man," Withers said in parting. "I think you'll keep our little secret. You see, it's not the ability to generate the glow that's dangerous; it's the passion, the arousal it



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can produce in others. Why do you think certain insects generate such a light, Mr. Wells? We think we're so advanced, so above the rest of nature. We're not.

"That glow, it's a kind of visual pheromone. We're none of us immune to it, any more than the insects are. I'm seventy-one years old, sir, but when I see that glow . . . well, I don't feel seventy any more. I don't feel anything except one thing, and that's what's so dangerous.

"The kids have been changed. They can handle it, deal with it. But not the rest of us. Not us unsuspecting innocents. It's too powerful for our systems.

"So you think about it, Mr. Wells. Think about the thing that rose up out of your brain last night on the hill and took control of you. The primitive part of your brain. Think about what could happen to those kids if that effect was magnified by a couple of hundred attentive scientists, male and female both." He smiled somberly a last time as he prepared to close the door on his way out.

"We're all fireflies, Mr. Wells."

The door shut firmly. Wells was alone in the room. He sat motionless on the bed and considered what the old doctor had said.

Crazy, he told himself, crazy and silly and foolish. I can control my emotions as well as anybody. Sure I can. He remembered the morning on the mountainside, the glow, the overwhelming throbbing in his loins and the mindless, blind desire that had taken complete command of him. All because of a little light, a peculiarly attractive glow.

He got up from the bed and hastily began gathering his things. Because he couldn't fool himself any more than he'd been able to fool his own body. Because that light destroyed common sense and careful thought.

No, he wouldn't reveal the secret of the luciferite effect. Not to his new bosses in Dallas, not to anyone. Because if it became known, people might come to the little town to drink the water in hopes of gaining the ability for themselves. Well-meaning researchers might synthesize the necessary compounds and spread the talent to everyone.

Wells was a sensible, happy man. He did not want to see civilization destroy itself through nuclear holocaust. Far less did he want to see reason and civilization ruined in a sexual one. . . .



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## IMPROBABLE BESTIARY: The Martian

Well, our rocket ship from Earth had accidentally run aground;
We were stranded on the barren Martian plain.
So while Joe sent a distress call I said I would look around,
Reconnoitering the craters and terrain.
I saw rocks and dying land, tons of reddish Martian sand,
So much emptiness: it almost seemed a pity.
Then I *saw* it! It was *real*: twisted strands of rusting *steel*,
And a rubble heap that must have been a CITY!
Then I heard someone speak, in a voice that was weak
And a tone full of worry and fright . . .
And I turned to see who—was it one of the crew?—
But there wasn't a person in sight . . .
There was nobody there, yet the pink Martian air
Seemed to echo a faraway call:
"*I'm the very last Martian,*
*The very last Martian,*
*The very last Martian of all . . .*"

Then I heard something move in the shadows behind me.
I thought that the crew had sent someone to find me,
So I turned, and I saw something there . . .
And it *wasn't* a crewman—
*The thing wasn't human—*
It crawled through the dust in despair . . .
I heard words in my brain, full of sorrow and pain,
As the thing crept along in its crawl:
"*I'm the very last Martian,*
*The very last Martian,*
*The very last Martian of all . . .*"



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"*Long ago*," the thing said, shaping words in my head,
"*We were healthy and strong, and our planet was red*
*And our cities rose up to the sky . . .*
*Then the ground turned to dust, and our cities to rust,*
*And I watched all my family die . . .*
*You're from Earth, are you, man?*
*Tell me this if you can:*
*All my people are dead! Tell me . . . WHY?*"
And I wished I knew what to reply . . . . . .

Then the Martian crawled away. There was nothing I could say,
And I went to join my shipmates not much later.
"We've been found!" said Joe. "Hooray! Rescue ships are
on the way!"
Then he asked me what I'd seen beyond the crater . . .
"Only dust," I replied. "Dust and shadows," I lied,
"Well, come on: let's get out of this place."
Then I whispered a prayer to the thin Martian air
For the Martian and all of its race.

Well, the days became a year, and I've got a fine career,
Flying colonists from Marsport to the station.
Now I supervise a crew; there's a lot of work to do,
Terraforming Mars for human habitation.
But I swear, late at night, when the twin moons are bright,
And the Fleet ships roar off into space
There are times when I hear ancient words full of fear,
Ancient sounds from a faraway place.
I can hear the refrain on the high Martian plain,
In a voice that is distant and small:
"*I'm the very last Martian,*
*The very last Martian,*
*The very last Martian of all . . .*"

**—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre**


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# MUD/AURORA

by D. D. Storm

art Karl Kofoed

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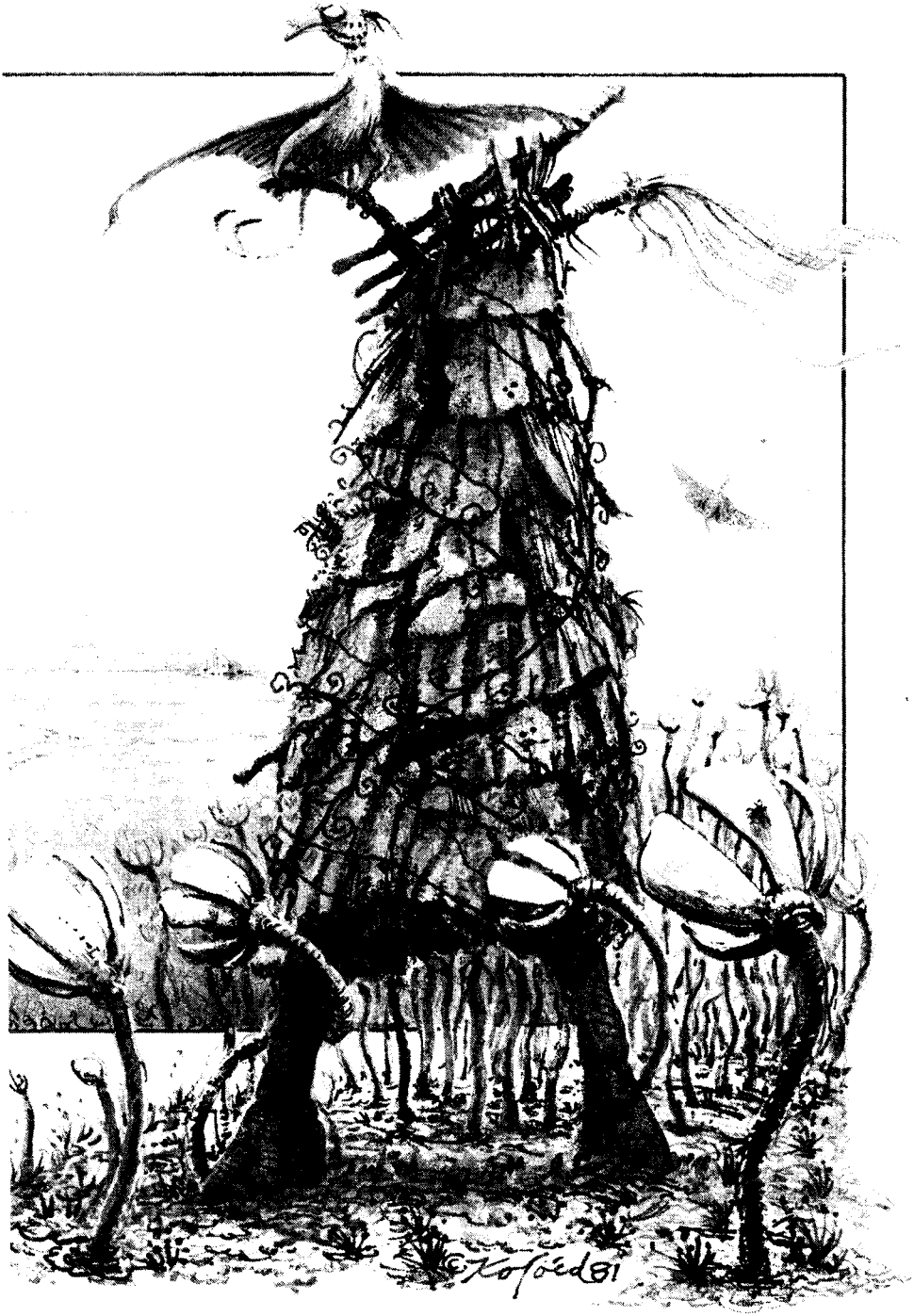


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*This is the first published story for D.D. Storm, who is finishing three years as a teacher in Honolulu and is in the process of moving to Massachusetts to do research projects on the subject of artificial intelligence.*

When I was young I learned that there are three kinds of people: *sah, lo,* and *kai.* I was *sah,* of course, and grew up in a *sah* house. It was the boast of my house that ours were the most subtle of the *sah* languages for describing what is correct. When deep in *sah* our elders never failed to answer a question of correctness put to them by another house. I remember spending many nights as a child sitting near the heater in our meeting room, watching the elders create an elegant syntax with which to reply to moral questions in an appropriate meter.

To say "Sah!" is to say "Exactly. Correctly put." No project is ever undertaken in the village without the benedictions of the *sah* to ensure that it is proper. "Nature says what is possible, but the *sah* say what is correct."

I learned our house languages easily when I was young, and I remember one lesson particularly well. An elder asked us to describe a *sah*'s living out of house. My sentences were ominous in their disapproval. The clauses telling of such things clashed and clattered in discord and the lack of harmony between the words themselves forced the conclusion that such a thing was not *sah*. What has happened since is difficult to explain, given such training and my feel for the *sah* in a situation. I suppose it came about because, while I was quick to speak of others' actions, I never bothered to speak of my own in house languages until it was too late, assuming that whatever I did was *sah*. At any rate, I began to develop a language of my own, different from that of my house. Once I started I became engrossed in the project and never thought to ask myself whether it was correct.

My words were primitive and the grammar of my language was painfully simple then, but it was a language different from those of my house in an important way: it described the way things were related to each other rather than their relationship to *sah*. I did not think the difference was important until one afternoon when I was walking in the garden of my house.

Described in my own language, what happened was this: I moved beneath a bitter pink sky with flowers flocking slowly along the



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rows. Whenever I stood still they stuck to my feet with a gentle suction and when I began walking again they fell off, quivering. An animal which had flown into the garden flashed its brilliant wings as it hovered over a berry. All of this uttered in my language produced a symmetrical sequence of clauses which was pleasing to the ear. Its diagram would contain a low shape for the flower and a higher shape for the animal, with its verbs hovering winglike over it.

As the animal licked the berry a flower flowed up behind it and stealthily grew forward to enclose it. It moved so slowly that the animal did not react until only its wings protruded from the walls of the flower, and then it was too late. The flower took control of the animal, flexing the wings until its mastery was strong enough to will it to rise into the crimsoning sky. The two beings soared away from me toward the safety of the bush.

In my language this event was strikingly correct. A diagram of the sentence describing it would have a form like that of an arrow pointing beyond a gate. Conjoined with earlier sentences describing the flower and the animal, the effect produced was to call up images of two entities uniting to create a thing going beyond themselves. The correspondence of my grammar with the event felt right, and I stood there, struck by the syntactic integrity of what I had seen.

Then someone called me, asking where I was. "In the garden," I replied, and in replying caused the episode to alter. Seen in my own terms, I had been standing in a garden which was part of a striking event, observing an incident which went far beyond itself. Now, as I used the house language to reply, I found myself in the midst of flowers disturbed by my presence. Far away were the wings of the animal, dull with impropriety. The garden was not in a proper state and the episode I had seen was improper: a flower had escaped.

I spoke to an elder of this happening, telling him that it seemed as though my eyes themselves had changed when I changed languages. He frowned and told me I was not acting as a *sah* should act. "Describe your actions in the house language," he said.

For the first time I realized that my actions were not *sah*. In the language of our house they were describable only in sentences which clashed in structure, placing me in positions generally occupied by *lo* or *kai* nouns. Put that way only one sentence had the resonance of truth: "My actions were not *sah*."

"*Sah!*" said the elder, and he smiled as he always did when a student had learned a lesson well.

If all this had happened to me when I was younger, I would have



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no reason to tell my story. But by this time my language was beyond its formative stages and without thinking I shifted back to it. The world became a different place and I spoke further.

"What I did was not *sah*, but it was *good*." I said this in my language and the elder placed his hands upon his ears.

"I do not understand 'good.' A thing is *sah* or it is not. You must not talk in this other way."

What he said was correct, and what I said was good. It was too late to take away my image of the flower and the animal flying above the walls of our garden. The meaning of that image was rooted in my new language, and it was too late to take that away, too.

The *lo* lived in houses near my own house. They were not adept at speaking but they had skills which we respected, and they had devised a number of new ways for us to live. Our heatrock furnaces and our houses are based on the ideas of the *lo,* as is our system of quarrying heatrock and our creation of trails by guiding water through the dilbush. While such contrivances are of small worth compared to the intricacy and precision of a well-put sentence, they have their uses and our lives are more secure because of them. Thus the *lo* are worthy of some respect and we *sah* always put our thoughts into simple tongues when conversing with them.

"Things are done by *kai,* thought by *lo,* judged by *sah*." There are many bad ideas which the *lo* have proposed. Years ago when the ice was moving closer and closer to the village they demanded that we move, and set about designing devices to carry our possessions. The *sah* spoke at length to persuade them that moving would destroy us as people. Our languages, which held their meaning best when spoken where they had been developed, would lose their sense, and our flocks of flowers would wither and die if taken from their home soil. At last the *lo* gave in; and it happened that the ice came no closer, just as the *sah* had said.

Another time the *lo* put forth a thinker who said that every member of the village should learn to speak the *sah* languages. This idea was given up when members of my house pointed out that such a plan would mix the types of people and each type would lose the ability to work for our survival. The very rhythms of the sentences describing such a plan condemned it and the *lo* were dissuaded, although they had thought at one time that the plan had merit.

These examples show why the *sah* are the most respected people in the village: they are keepers of the languages which have helped us to live as the only people in the world. Centuries of survival between the walls of ice have given us the grammars of the *sah*.



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Encoded in those grammars are the ways to survive. If a change proposed is a correct one, it will appear correct when it is spoken of by someone in *sah*. If not, the fact is soon apparent.

It was clear to everyone but me that my language was not a correct one, but my way of speaking appealed to some of the younger members of my house, and they began to use it as a joke. Eventually even the *lo* noticed something different about the way we younger *sah* were speaking, and they complained. It seemed to the elders of my house that my actions might corrupt the languages we used, the very things which preserved the meaning in our lives; and they were required to act.

Above the crowded square at the center of our village the sky shimmered green and yellow. I stood last in line with other young men of the age to be wedded. Elders walked behind us, placing a woman with each of us who was to receive a wife. A shadow fell between my legs to merge with my own and I knew a woman had been paired with me. There was some reaction from the observers, and I wondered who she was. I had not suspected during the week of negotiations that I was to be married; but, like each of the *sah* in my line, I hoped that she was an intelligent speaker.

The elders began at the other end of the line, chanting ritual words to each of the couples, and each man who had received a wife turned to embrace the woman behind him. When they came to me they chanted, "May you live well"—an utterance which was not the usual one, but the best of all which might have been spoken under the circumstances. I turned around and saw my wife standing behind me, but I did not embrace her. I had been married to a *kai* woman.

"*Sah* speaks to *sah* and, sometimes, to *lo*." Before that day, I had never passed words with the *kai*; but I knew that they were good laborers and that they would have perished in the cold without *sah* and *lo* to guide them. Such things had happened long ago. Under supervision they were capable of performing complicated tasks with their hands. They were strong, good breeders, and unintelligent, but they possessed the happiness which comes from having no responsibility. It was said that they could go into a deep state called *kai* and work for longer periods than one would think possible. I had also heard that in house they communicated their thoughts by gestures and dances, but no one from my house had seen such things. One thing I knew for certain—the life of a *sah* and a *kai* together would not be a pleasant one. I whispered to the elder before me that there must have been some mistake made.

"The action is correct," he said. "You are to live in the garden



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house beyond the village. The woman may trade flowers for heatrock here, but you must not return or speak to one of us again. Some day you may see that this action is *sah*, and a generous one."

I have come to realize that he was correct. I could have been cast out to wander in the dilbush like a wounded tree, but instead they had given me a *kai* to work for me, and they had given me a place to live where I could not endanger the village. I would never be able to perform the proper work of a *sah*, but I would have a house, and I could think about my language. Many times after that day I wished that my fate had been a harsher one, but possibly things have worked out for the good. Perhaps a reader of these words will be able to tell.

Her name was Kalak. She was my age. She had never spoken to a *sah* before. These things I learned as we splashed along the trail to our abandoned garden. I led the way and Kalak dragged a cart containing tools, heatrock, flowers to start our flock, and other things we would need to live. No one had maintained the trail for a long time, and in several places the dike had washed out, leaving it dry. Tangled masses of dilbush barred the way in the dry places, and we stopped while Kalak brought water in a pail to drive the plants back.

The gardener's house was barely visible. Dilbush had gotten over the moat and spread to fill the area inside. A tendril thrusting out the chimney circled slowly in the air; and the door, windows, and walls were thick with twisted trunks. Kalak took the bucket and began to drive the plants away with dousings of water. I stared back along the water path toward the village. People I could talk to were at the other end of that path, as was my proper work. What was there for a *sah* to do out of house? No one could speak with a *kai*. There seemed to be no point to my existence in that place.

All this I thought in my house languages. When I turned to my own language for comfort, I found little. Events were neither good nor bad. I had a sense that the grammar was waiting for more things to happen so that it could relate them.

"Words do not speak to gestures," and so it was with us. Kalak had cleared the dilbush from one room of our house and cleaned and started the heater. We had eaten two of our flowers and an animal which flew in. It was dark, and the aurora cast a gentle green light into the room. Kalak spread blankets on the sleeping shelf. We removed our garments and there was a silence.

"We are married," I said. She nodded.

"There are many things to be done, but it is spring and you have time to do them. You must fill the food bin, clear the garden, repair



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the trail, and expand the herd of flowers. You have done well today."

"What things will you do?"

"I will say the things which need doing and tell what things are correct."

"Good," she said. There was a silence. "You will not ask me to have children?"

I laughed. "It would not be possible. The seed of a *sah* does not fall unless the woman he lies with has talked to him in the languages of *sah* and they have spoken of deep things. We may lie together and perform the act, I suppose, since we are married, but no children will result." It struck me that she was quite ill-informed. Everybody knew that the types of people would not mix. If they were combined then nobody would be able to achieve a state of *sah* or *lo* or *kai* and we would not survive next time the ice came near. Didn't everyone know this?

"Then please instruct me to lie with you," she said. "I am frightened." She turned toward me and I noted that she was handsome in a sturdy sort of way. The women of my house were slimmer and more beautiful, but she had the functional appearance of a verb inflected for everyday speech. Desire for her arose to some extent in me and I began to speak endearments to increase it.

"You are a fair woman and I am a man. There is in you the delicate modulations of adjectives and the beauty of the words for colors." She moved nearer in the subtle green light and my desire grew. I began to speak more eloquently and was achieving some complicated feats of syntax when I felt her hand touching me in a shameful way. I ignored her gesture and continued to talk, although my desire was ebbing.

"Why are you talking? Let us lie together," she said. Her hands fluttered explicitly on me, and all the stories I had heard as a child about the crude practices of the *kai* came to mind. She had not listened to what I said, and yet she thought herself worthy to lie with a *sah!* Her actions were vulgar and her mind dull. Taking her wrists in my hands I pushed her from me.

"Your actions are not correct. You may lie with yourself!" I spoke with authority and rolled away.

We slept apart that night and every other night until a time I will tell of. Some nights I awoke to the sound of sobbing, and other nights I myself wondered whether it was worth my going on. Neither of us spoke again of lying together.

Our house was 15 paces long and 6 paces wide. It had windows in three of its low rock walls and it was crowned with a steep, sloping



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roof. There were two rooms inside, one with a sleeping shelf, heater, and table for eating, and another with nesting stalls for the flowers. The second room opened onto the garden, an enclosure 8 paces wide and 40 paces long with a lattice frame constructed over it. In winter a transparent sheet of sewn dilbush bark would be placed over the lattice to keep heat in and snow out.

The moat which surrounded our house and garden was filled by a stream falling from the hills behind the house. It was this stream which watered the path from our house to the village, making passage through the dilbush possible.

Within two weeks of our arrival Kalak had cleared the garden, repaired the lattice, started a food pile for the flowers, built pens for seedlings, and set about pollinating the breeders that were ready for reproducing. Meanwhile I grew dispirited, thinking about a life with no one to talk to. The greatest pleasures of the *sah* arise from speaking in house, couching their intricate thoughts in complicated utterances. There were deep truths I wished to express, but when I said them to Kalak she could not understand them. If I said something she could understand, then it was not deep and it was not true. Sometimes I thought about going out to die in the dilbush, struggling through the thick, ropy tendrils until I fell exhausted. Then, as the plants grew tight around me, I would utter the finest sentence ever spoken by a *sah*. Two things dissuaded me from taking this course of action: the sentence I spoke might not be as fine as I hoped, and even if it was a good one, nobody would know.

One morning Kalak got up early and clothed herself without looking at me. She was behaving secretively, and I wondered why. "I am going to the hills. Please watch the flocks," she said, and before I could react she was out of the door.

I shouted, "Watching flocks is not work for a *sah!*" but she was determined not to hear me.

I did not do the work—what *sah* would?—and as the morning passed I wondered when she would return. By noon the flowers were grouped around the feeding bin expectantly, waiting for their food. I knew that if they were not fed by evening the young ones would suffer, and I believed that Kalak would return before such a thing would happen. I was right. Late in the afternoon I looked up from my thoughts and saw her in the garden, throwing food to the flowers. Her leggings and coat were muddy, as was her hair. She did not speak of the incident, and neither did I.

By midsummer our flowers were breeding well, and we had nearly as many as the garden could support, but they were losing their



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flavor. "The spirit of the gardener is in the flowers." I attributed the problem to a sadness which displayed itself more and more in Kalak. She had labored hard except for the day I have just described, and "Work well done will please a *kai*," but she did not seem to be content. We would receive little heatrock for our flowers unless something was done to improve her outlook.

I awoke one morning worrying about this problem and saw that Kalak had already left the sleeping shelf. I found her in the garden constructing something out of dilbush root, rocks, and kernut leaves. It seemed to perform no function. She stood thinking for many minutes before she placed each of its parts, but I thought that the same result could have been achieved by simply stacking the objects together. It was several hours before she stepped back from the thing and shook herself, as if awakening from sleep.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"What is its purpose?"

"I don't know how to tell you." She said this sullenly and it angered me. I drifted into *sah* to think about the matter.

"Building this is not correct when there are important things to do."

"Can you help with them while I do this?" For some reason her eyes were pleading, but I was astonished. Surely she knew my reply before I uttered it: "It is not correct for a *sah* to do *kai* work."

"Then what can you do?"

To my surprise no answer came. In the languages of *sah* each reply I considered began with reference to my living out of house, and there was no correct terminating clause. I had no reply to a question about correctness, and to my shame the question had been put me by a *kai*. I spoke no more at that time and slept badly all night.

When I awoke the next morning Kalak was already at work on another structure near the food bin. This one was taller and thinner, composed of a large group of rocks at the base of a frame woven from dilbush root. She was lashing sheets of bark to the frame so that the whole had the appearance of a house filled with solid roots. There was no room inside it for flowers to shelter; the thing appeared to be a useless object which took up garden space. The action was clearly incorrect.

"I forbid you to build these things," I said in the patient tone of a *sah* who corrects. Kalak did not reply and her eyes showed no sign that she had understood. She added a stone to the base, as if I had



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not spoken.

"Then I will tear it down!" In a rage I strode to the thing, forced to perform an action bordering on that of a *kai*. I did it as quickly as I could, kicking the new thing and the other one down. "Untie the parts and save them so that some use comes of this," I said in the tones of a *sah* who has been angered and whose will is not to be crossed.

Instead Kalak turned and ran through the house, and I heard her splashing along the stream which fills our moat. As she disappeared into the bush I stood in the garden, astonished that she had not obeyed the words of a *sah*. If people had acted in this way in the past no one would have survived the cold.

She had not returned by midafternoon, and the flowers were gathered anxiously around the feeding bin. Some of the smaller ones were already losing size. I decided to pursue her and force her to return. In her present state she would probably spoil their flavor, but it seemed better that they lose some flavor than starve.

The dilbush on each side of the stream was very thick and I was certain that Kalak had stayed in the stream bed. The farther I went the smaller the stream grew, and the thicker was the network of limbs above me. I was walking in a crouch with one hand on the rocks in front for balance when I heard a sound like that of someone jumping. Quietly I crawled forward and looked through the trees at a pond with a small island at its center.

Kalak was dancing on the island, wearing only a length of bark cloth tied around her waist. Her eyes were unfocused as if she were in some deep state, and her dance was unlike anything I had seen before. I hauled myself up on the stream bank to watch it. It is difficult to say here what the dance was like. My description is taken from what I thought in my own language, but it was not created to describe this sort of thing. I will do as well as I can with the words available, for the way the dance had meaning may be important.

There seemed to be four themes to it. One had to do with a form which was constructed on the island. It stood two-legged, as tall as she was, rough purple trunks giving it mass, and silverthreads blowing from something which might have been a mouth. It was a grotesque thing, slightly suggestive of a person, and somehow it disturbed me. Another theme was a yearning quality, expressed in the way Kalak let her arms flow to the form and the way she held herself when she leaped. A third was a gesture which she repeated in many ways. I thought it was related to the common sign, "let us touch," which means one has a desire to lie together or a desire to



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touch in some deeper way. The two are told apart by context, but I could not say which was meant in the dance. Last, there was the timing of the dance, related to the flare and ebb of the aurora above us. At first Kalak's motions followed the lead of the aurora, flashing when it did and shimmering in low whirls when it died down. Later, she danced in synchrony with it, timing her turns to its undulations and encircling the form with her arms when the sky pulsed in a burst of color. Finally it seemed that she was a few moments ahead of the aurora. It was as if her movements showed the colors what to do and the power of her dance forced them to follow. At the end she touched the form in the way she had touched me when we lay together, and the aurora showered colors in response. Then she collapsed and the trance seemed to pass from her. She lay without moving, staring at the sky.

I had been so intent upon the dance that dilbush tendrils had wound themselves around my leg and arm, without my noticing. I could barely reach water with which to loosen their hold. A peculiar mood came over me which I could not precisely characterize. My plan had been to confront Kalak and order her back to the house in the harshest *sah* tones. Instead I returned without letting her know that I had seen her.

I sat alone in the garden that evening, wondering what to do. She had not come back, and I felt that she would not do so that day. Our flowers huddled around the food bin and some of them were wilting from hunger. It would be wrong for me to perform *kai* labor. Especially this *kai* labor—the contents of a food bin were foul and unclean. It would be wrong for me to perform any action at all. But these thoughts did not help me, and I began to think in my own language. The food bin was there, and a spade was there. The flowers there were in need, and I was here. The arrangement was out of balance, demanding that I move nearer the spade. My action set clauses resonating in anticipation—a flash of meaning passed between the word for me and the word for flowers. I took the spade—a noun—and plunged it into the bin—a solid verb—and a sentence was over and it shimmered in my mind.

Grammars shifted in my head, and I felt new nouns struggling to be uttered. I let the language of *sah* sink away to make room for whatever would come. What I had done was not *sah,* but my own language was expanding in all directions. Light passed through the nouns which named my action, and I felt that it was good.

Thinking in this way, I fed the flowers.

It was not so easy in the morning. For half an hour I stood at the



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garden's edge and willed myself to take the spade, but the action was beyond me. I had used up all my *sah* the night before, and was too tired to create the sentences which gave my action meaning. Instead I saw the situation with my old eyes and held back, as any *sah* would do. The flowers got their food at last, but the feeding was not done with confidence, and I had nothing good to say about it when it was over. Fragments of discordant *sah* phrases clashed in my mind, telling me that I was dirty and that I had gone beyond a point which no one should pass.

Kalak came in the door defiantly that afternoon, muddy and wet. She moved as though she were very tired, but her eyes were lively and angry. She went to the garden, and I heard her catch her breath. Then came the sound of footsteps and the spade scattering the evening food to the flowers. As she worked I heard her humming a low tune.

Neither of us spoke that evening. Kalak rarely said anything, and I had nothing correct to say. When we lay on the sleeping shelf I felt myself moving into *sah,* and the words which had echoed in my mind all day demanded to be uttered. I rolled toward Kalak to tell her that my actions had been incorrect, hers had been intolerable, and that we would do best to walk into the bush and let the forest have us. Before I could begin she touched me in the way she had touched her form when she danced and those thoughts died away. It came to me in my own language that touching her might not be bad. I remembered her dance and moved clumsily with her as the form on the island might have moved. "She is here and so am I," the words came to me, "and some actions are not bad."

When I touched her she arched and moaned, but she was not in pain. We lay together all that night, and it was good. In the morning I realized neither of us had said a word. Kalak rolled over and looked at me, and I saw that she was troubled.

"I could have taken the seed," she said. "Could you have given it?" It was correct for her to wonder. Everyone knew that to mix the types of people would be to create disaster for us all.

"I could have given the seed," I said, astonished. It should not have been possible and I asked how such a thing could be. The languages of my house forbid its happening, but nothing in the nouns and verbs of my own language ruled it out. In fact, as I thought in my own language about what we might do I caught suggestions of possibilities more shocking than this, but I did not then have the *sah* to pursue them.

We didn't lie together after that, afraid of the child which might



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result. Kalak labored harder than ever in the garden except for the times she went into *kai* to build other constructions. It seemed to me that they said things in a language I did not understand; one seemed to whisper "stillness," and another said "may this flock endure," but I could not hear them when I was not in *sah*. Kalak has told me since that these things are real to her, and this is why the *kai* gave her to me—they felt some new force in the things she built, and they were afraid. She was afraid of her constructions too, she said, because they were incorrect. But she could not stop herself from making them; and otherwise her actions were correct, weren't they? I was not so sure, but I wanted her to be untroubled, and so I said yes.

When Kalak went into *kai* I fed the flowers myself, knowing she would not come out until the night had passed. My language prompted me to do this, and I did not feel soiled by the action as long as I did not think in the languages of my house. I let the things she built stand, too, because they spoke to me as she could not, and because my own language did not forbid them.

One time when Kalak was in *kai,* an adventurous yellow flower melted around the handle of a spade leaning on the garden wall. Slowly it pulsed up the handle to the top of the wall. I prepared to chase it, for it was poised at the edge, ready to roll away to freedom, but it swayed on its base for a moment and then descended the handle into the garden again. I wondered about this and, since I could not speak of it with Kalak, I tried an experiment like those a *lo* might perform. Seeing an animal fluttering at the lattice outside, I opened the wall so that the animal could enter. It fluttered about until it tired and dropped to rest on the floor. A flower moved onto it and rode it through the opening to the outside. They swooped and soared until they were out of sight, and I thought that they were gone, but several minutes later there was the rush of wings and I saw the animal on the garden floor again. It perched on the ground while the flower moved away from it, and then it shook itself. Frightened, it darted through the opening and flew away.

We left the lattice open after that and found that the flavor of our flowers was better. What was more, we had very few of the escapes which plague the other gardeners. I felt as though I had performed a *lo* feat, although I didn't know why the flowers came back. "Maybe they want to be eaten by creatures they like," said Kalak.

When a load of our flowers went to the village Kalak would return with a load of the highest grade heatrock in exchange. I was happy to see this until it struck me that the new flavor was the taste of



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my own labor. We were sending my shame to the village where anyone with a piece of heatrock could buy it for his dinner. I could think about my labor in my language without shame, but the villagers could not, and I knew what they would think if they knew. Again I considered wandering in the bush—the only correct action in such a case—and I would have done it, but Kalak asked, "Is there shame if you are not a *sah?*" I searched the nouns of my languages and the languages of my house and found no word for me. It was as if my actions had taken me outside the domain of what could be said, to a place where there was only meaninglessness. How would a person who could not be named find guidance or support for what he did?

There was no word for me. Thinking on this loosened something else inside me late in autumn as I was struggling to build the garden wall higher against the winter snow. I will tell what happened as well as I can in these words, but it was *kai,* and *kai* does not do well in words. I was lifting a rock when I felt myself shift in viewpoint and I was with the rock, lifting and being lifted, but it was not because of me. "Stillness," whispered Kalak's structure in the garden, and the rocks I carried became part of me as they were placed. They had already placed themselves, and they placed me, yet nothing did the placing. Nouns and verbs did not exist in that state, only some new adjective I can't remember now, but when the experience was over I had done the work of three days. Was it shameful? I hope someday to know, if I can find the words to talk of it.

One morning Kalak looked up from the heater and gasped in surprise. Outside I saw the first snow of winter lying over everything. The dilbush slumped motionless under the white, as they would be until spring, their branches clasped watertight around their trunks. In the garden our flowers had gone into their winter dormancy and the path leading to the village was a strip of ice reflecting the colors above it. Kalak's eyes flashed at the sight. All sound and movement beneath the sky was gone, and in the roaring silence the same thought stirred inside us both.

"It is beautiful," said Kalak.

"It is," I agreed. "But what is there to say of us?"

Kalak jerked as if receiving an unexpected blow. "There are words for me," she said. "I am *kai* and my actions are correct. Except the things I make. You have told me so." She stood apart from me and said again, "I am *kai!*"

I knew the shock she would feel if she learned the truth, and I searched for words to reassure her, but there was nothing to say.



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The languages I spoke were silent, for we had moved outside the range of what could be discussed. We were shaped differently from nouns, and we jarred with the verbs too much to make a sentence. I had had thoughts like those of a *lo* and had slipped into *kai*. Kalak had made things which spoke in a *sah*-like way, and we had talked together of these things. Such facts could not be put in the languages of what is correct, and my own language would not say them. "What cannot be said should not exist," and Kalak knew this all too well. She understood my silence then better than she understood my speech, and she turned away from me.

After that she ate little and spent most of her time sitting at the window, staring dully at the snow. She wanted to walk into it and not return, she said, if that could be called correct. The effect her feelings had on me was strange. I had wanted to do the same thing as an act of honor, but her desiring it made me reconsider. I still saw her as a *kai* and saw myself as *sah,* no matter whether there were words to support my view. I had a duty to keep her from the cold, as she had a duty to ask me what was correct, and now honor demanded that I attempt to prevent her going out to freeze. There was another motive acting on me then, but I was not aware of it and it was an emotional attraction, not relevant to the things I want to tell.

I spent less time brooding in the sleeping shelf after that and passed my days in search of ways to name us. "I will find a word for us," I said, "and then I will know what other words apply, and I will know what we should do." But the fire had gone out of Kalak's eyes, and she did not hear me.

At the window looking out, Kalak reminded me of one of her structures, solid and conveying meaning. "Give me the words to let me go," her posture said, and I fought its influence as I worked with my language, searching for a way to give us meaning. My results were not encouraging, and I found myself day after day with barely energy enough to feed the heater and prepare flowers for us to eat. The best parts of the winter came when we quarrelled over the close quarters or the boredom. At least then we were alive; at other times it was as if neither of us existed.

On those rare days when the weather cleared Kalak would walk into the snow to stretch herself, and I would keep the heater going. I worried that she would not return, and so I broke my thoughts on language every hour or so to reassure myself that she had not stopped moving. The sights which struck me then were like the landscape of our life—invisible silent slopes with mute, shrouded



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forms like empty words across them, and far away the dark spot of her between the whiteness and the shimmering sky.

I found the word I wanted in early spring, and I will tell the way it came as carefully as I can in this language, so that a *sah* who reads these words might understand something of it.

My language described the relationships between things in the world, but the world was a place in which there were three kinds of people, and we were not any of those kinds. We could not be right in a world like that, and one world is all there is, I thought. But I was wrong.

As I considered the way my language had grown and looked at the way it differed from the languages of my house, I saw again the possibility of something new behind it, something suggested by the grammars I had learned, but not within them. To tell how this could be I must resort to metaphor.

My language related things to things in the way that light is related to the ice it passes through, and its words were like faceted ice crystals of various shapes. Imagine an enclosed stage with many such crystals on its floor. Imagine further that you are to make meaning by combining the shape of the crystals into geometric patterns. The hues of the crystals are similar and cannot be told apart except when you are deep in *sah*. Now imagine that any pattern containing a misplaced crystal or a crystal of the wrong color creates such dissonance that the stage shudders and threatens to collapse. This is how the sentences of my language were formed. The crystals were words, the patterns sentences, the trembling stage my mind.

One morning early in spring I said to Kalak, "I will find a word for us today or stop trying." She did not react, and as I turned away I touched her to reassure her, something I had never done before. She raised her head and saw me sitting crosslegged in the garden. I nodded to her and closed my eyes, feeling my *sah* at its strongest. I did not know it then, but Kalak came into the garden, slipping into *kai,* and began to build another structure. I was already on my stage, with curtains of silvergrass around me and hundreds of delicately tinted crystals on the floor. Some force held them and me to the stage, but it did not affect anything which was lifted up.

Moving carefully among the words, I made a sentence by combining words for "flower" and "orange" in a declarative pattern, with simple verbs to round it out. "The flower is orange." Light refracted onto the curtains, showing the relation of the sentence to the world as the crystals revolved slowly over the stage. It was right.

I put the crystals back on the floor and picked up the interrogative



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"who." I placed it with a dual verb for Kalak and me—"who are"—and left it spinning while I looked for a word to fill the sentence out.

I had gotten this far many times before, and I knew that nothing on the stage would fill the space. But today my *sah* was strong enough to take me to the edges of the stage, a place I had never gone before. Away from the crystals, now I could see a sort of haze hanging over them and recognized it as the influence of grammar. There was a wisp of it coming from behind the curtain of silvergrass, and I parted the grass to look beyond. It was darkness without meaning, but floating in it was a shapeless chunk of ice. I stared at it and wondered whether it could be shaped to make the word I wanted. In another place just then Kalak was beginning her structure, deep in *kai,* and perhaps that helped me, for as my thoughts passed over the ice a facet appeared at its top and rough outlines formed at its sides. A *lo* could smooth them down, I thought, and so could I. With the thought the sides of the ice took on a crystal form unlike any I had seen before, but I knew that it was right. The bottom, where the word would connect with the sentence I had begun, was a flowing mass, but I thought of it in *sah* and the final form emerged. There was a word before me now, and it was right, but I knew that it would not fit the words I had prepared. As I became aware of this the words floating in the air altered form to fit the ice, and as they did so something changed inside me too. I no longer knew the way to talk about correctness, and I did not care. I picked the new word up and placed it with the other crystals in the air. They fit together to make the question "Who are we?"

A flood of light burst from the words, as if it had been waiting all my life to be released. It blazed off in a new direction away from the stage, and I let myself float after it. The stage disappeared, and I went with the light toward the thing it meant, back in what must have been time, toward something I had always known of without ever knowing it. Across blurred chasms of flared colors and grinding icewalls I went back to another time, and I will tell what I found there as I found it, although I am translating from a very different language.

It was the violet time of sunset. There was a woman in front of me, sitting on a ridge. She was one of my ancestors, pale, without much hair, and she was troubled. A flare of aurora lit her from the side, casting her silhouette in violet on the rock beside her.

There were others like her in the valley below. Officers, engineers, some crew. The avalanche had covered them and wrecked their



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communicator, and when they returned to the landing site they saw the ship had left them for dead. An engraved plaque commemorating their passing in the course of duty was all it had left behind.

She planted a fist in the summer mud and thought that the plaque was probably appropriate. In the valley the crew made shelters against the summer cold and forced back the damned encroaching plants with water, but how could they survive with what they had? And if they made it through the winter how would their descendants survive? Every time the planet wobbled, ice would cover nearly everything; and at best their children would become like the plants, thinking only of food, cold, and water.

She was a linguistics officer, and—sitting in the mud beneath the sky on fire—she realized they had one kind of technology to use, and she possessed it. They could preserve the differences between them with language, and pass some sort of social structure to their descendants without seeming to do so, if she used the things she knew correctly. She did not know whether the genes which made the officers, engineers, and crew good at their tasks would be weakened by interbreeding; but she did not want them to take the chance, and so she thought that those distinctions should be built into a grammar to pass on to their descendants. Rules and codes could be repealed or reinterpreted, but grammar could not, and she could build a language which would contain the things she wanted them to know.

She saw the way it would have to be passed on. The officers would have to learn to speak it naturally so that the children would learn it without knowing its origin. And it would have to be complex enough to keep its speakers' minds from going dead. It would be all they would have to occupy them when the cold was worst.

She saw a rule it would be based on. This world was mostly mud between two hemispheres of ice, but the sky above it gave it a sort of beauty and she knew it was right to put those two things, mud and aurora, into it. From that time on the *sah* have blended the high tones of the aurora and the low tones of the mud in every sentence they have uttered.

Mud/Aurora. It was the first word in her new language, her name for the world, and she could feel the principles of syntax it inspired growing in her as she stood and began to descend the ridge. They would use her language or their humanity would not survive; but she would leave in it a trace of its beginning, so that if their descendants, somewhere in the long grim years ahead, grew human enough to understand its grammar, they could understand something of its origins and change them if they liked. She did not want



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to play a deity, after all.

The woman made her way down the ridge, and as she did the light grew dim around me. It was my guide back to the stage and as it faded I floated after it, as fast as I could, through eons of blurred impressions and upthrust icewalls to the stage. I had little *sah* left by then, and I used all of it in getting back before the last flickers died away in the sentence I had made.

Around me was turmoil and agony. A flock of ungrammatical constructions spun in the air, thrown up by the convulsions of the stage, as the fabric of my mind begin to tear. Kalak touched me then, and I felt frozen soil beneath my back. Above me was the lattice and the stars and Kalak standing beside a new form, suggestive of a person, but with shapeless matter in its hands. It was molding something new from the matter, and on its face was an expression of rightness. Kalak had that expression too, and her eyes were glowing.

Since that day I have felt my seed fall and Kalak has received it. When it is warmer we will take her new form with us, along with whatever we can carry. Our flowers will follow us, I think. We will attempt to live in a new way, but I do not know what it will be like. It is not right for us to do it near the village. If we succeed we might contaminate the grammars of the village life, and already I cannot speak in *sah* without distorting accents.

I am leaving this account so that some day, if the *sah* are curious, they may send someone in the direction we are going, toward the sunrise, to see whether other languages can make a world as good as theirs.

## THIRD ANSWER TO LUKE WARM AT FORTY BELOW
## (from page 85)

Two degrees (bachelor of arts and bachelor of science) above zero.

Parts 1 and 3 are based on questions in Michael Steuben's excellent puzzle feature in *Capital M*, a newsletter for the Mensa organization in the Washington, DC, area. Part 2 is from Jearl Walker's delightful book of recreational science, *The Flying Circus of Physics* (Wiley, 1975).



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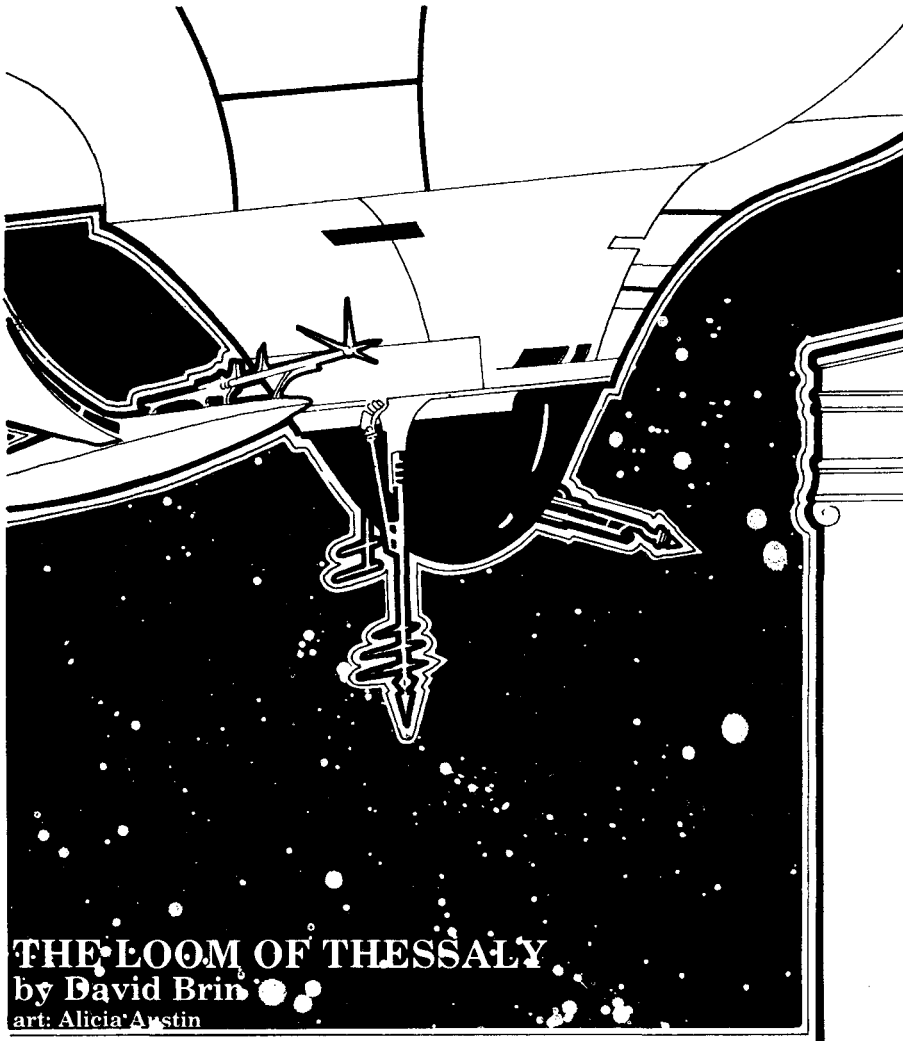


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*Mr. Brin is the author of* Sundiver, *which was published by Bantam, did his Master's thesis on the propagation of polarized light, and now lives in the San Diego, CA, area.*

## 1

"You can't get there from here."

At the time, Pavlos Apropoulos had thought his American friend had been joking. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Try it and see," Frank had said. "It's less than 150 kilometers from Athens, and I'll bet you can't even get close to it!"

That was easy for Frank to say, sitting in the comfort of Pavlos's Athens apartment. *He* wasn't going to be the one who went off, alone, into the wilderness to test it.

Pavlos's arms felt as if they were about to come off. He knew that the branch he was holding onto would tear free at any second, leaving him without any firm support. Yet his feet couldn't seem to find a purchase.

There was dust everywhere. The canyon was filled with a clay pungence that mixed with the over-ripe odors of bramble-bush and perspiration. He could taste blood from one of the cuts he'd taken on his face, during the panicky scramble down the flaky, slippery talus.

This was the easiest route. He was sure of it.

The branch tore loose just as Pavlos got his right foot settled on an uncertain chunk of partially decomposed granite. For a moment he teetered. The canyon wavered about him in a blur of hazy green thorn bushes and a narrow strip of cloudy sky overhead.

Pavlos threw the cluster of twigs away and grabbed for another hold. But the dry leaves came off like chaff as the ground crumbled beneath him.

The brush that had been so formidable in blocking his earlier descent now broke and parted in front of him like chips flying from an axe. The branches tore and whipped at his arms, which he vainly tried to keep over his face as he fell, running and crashing, down the steep slope.

Somehow, he stayed on his feet, though they skidded on the powdery surface. The shrubbery thickened toward the bottom and the slope flattened, but this slowed him only slightly as the headlong



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rush sent him splashing across a small rivulet of dirty water to slam, arms outstretched, into the opposite canyon wall.

Fragments of desiccated, ancient rock rained down upon him as he labored to catch his breath in a series of shuddering gasps. The clumps fell in a steady stream—a miniature landslide onto the back of his head.

Pavlos stood still, taking things in order. He wasn't ready to begin cataloging the bruises and scrapes he had taken. The thudding of loose gravel on his skull meant no more to his overloaded senses than the chalky, rank odor of dust and sweat which he took in with each ragged breath, or the almost unbearable weight of his backpack.

The landfall subsided at about the same rate as Pavlos's breathing. The dust settled, leaving a fine, white patina on his hair and hunched shoulders. He waited for a few moments longer, eyes shut tightly against the floating grit, listening to the fading creakings his passage down the scarp had set off.

When, finally, he looked around, Pavlos shuddered.

In thirty years of mountaineering he had seen many ravines like this, but this was the first time he had ever been in one. There had never been a need, before. There had always been another way . . . an easier route.

Not this time, though.

The place where he had come down was the best he had found in an entire day of searching. It was hideous.

Gnarled trees and thorn bushes covered the sixty-degree slope. Jagged rocks protruded from the starved, parched soil. It was a miracle he had come this far without breaking a leg, or his skull.

More than ever he was convinced he was on the right path. This monument to inaccessibility had to be the place Frank meant.

He checked for cuts and bruises. It was a good thing he had chosen, after carefully examining Frank's aerial photos, to wear leather for this expedition. It had protected most of his skin, although several unbelievable thorns had pierced his garments and had to be pulled out amid momentary, excruciating pain.

While checking the cuts on his face he discovered for the first time that his goggles were missing, probably torn off in the first headlong rush down the embankment.

He allowed his pack to slide down and form a seat for him to rest upon. With slow deliberation, he pulled out his aid-kit and applied disinfectant to the cuts on his face and the backs of his wrists.

Only after his breathing had settled, and the spots disappeared



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from in front of his eyes, did he allow himself a slow, sparing swallow from one of his canteens. He wetted a handkerchief and carefully wiped the grit away from his eyes and lips.

Upstream to the right, a few dozen meters, was the path of ascension he had picked out during his visual scouting, earlier, from the other side. It was the route with marginally fewer obstacles than elsewhere along this face.

He stood, groaning at the stretch of abused muscles, and moved a few feet to examine the route. Then he compared it with the path he would have to take if he turned around, right now, and went home.

Sure enough. As bad as the way down had been, it looked more tempting to someone trapped in the ravine than did the hellish slope he would have to climb if he continued forward.

It had been that way all the way here. Every trail, every game path, every natural sloping led one circumspectly *away* from the small area he wanted to reach. In every specific case there had been nothing suspicious about the avoidance. Each time there had been a good and obvious reason to turn one way, instead of the other that led here.

It was the sum that drove Pavlos crazy. It had only been by the most steadfast determination to violate all of the rules of mountaineering that he had been able to get this far. It had taken two days to come just five kilometers from that last hamlet of surly, taciturn herdsmen.

Pavlos went back to his pack and pulled out the high-altitude photos Frank had given him.

"This is the first one I took from orbit," Frank had said when he showed Pavlos the first, large-scale photo on top. "I used the cartography telescope on an interface with the computer onboard the Platform. This one locale was flagged in the course of a topography survey I was doing for the EEC—an attempt to determine maximum and minimum population density versus terrain type. This spot gave a Fourier Transform that was quite unusual."

The satellite photo was very clear. It looked like it had been taken from only a few thousand feet in altitude. Pavlos easily recognized the elevation contour markings that lay upon apparently typical, rugged Grecian highlands. He had, after all, been teaching map reading and leading expeditions when his young American friend had been scrawling stick figures in crayon on the kitchen wall in his parents' house in Des Moines.



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The photos lay on his dining room table, three stories above the noisy streets of Athens. Outside his apartment door children ran down the hall, screaming in some incoherent game. To him it was all part of the background. He worried over the other lines and squiggles on Frank's map. He was reluctant to admit his ignorance to the astronaut, however close they had become during a mission in the Sudan, two years before.

"This is in Thessaly, is it not?" He pointed to the shape of the hillsides, the lay of the sun in the creek beds, wishing to show that expertise meant as much as did fancy technology.

Frank's eyebrows rose. Impressed, he showed it with typical American ingenuousness. Americans had no second skin, no Mediterranean wall of caution. Pavlos loved them for it.

"Yes, that's right," Frank had said. "And here you can see how the population density and terrain accessibility profiles rise and fall together nicely everywhere.

"Here is the city of Thessalonica, with almost a million people. Now weighted *only* against local resources there's no good explanation for its population advantage over, say, Larisa a bit farther south. But taking into account factors such as travel times along various egress points, terrain . . ."

"Yes, yes. I get the point." Pavlos was pleased. He had managed to get the information out of Frank without asking for it, and picked up an opportunity to mutter with fatherly impatience at the same time. Such minor stylistic victories helped make a pleasure out of a lazy afternoon.

"So what I can't figure out is why you thought it so important to show this to me at my apartment, and in such secrecy, hmmm?"

Frank sat down.

"Oh, Hell. You know this is low-priority stuff, Pav. Ever since you helped us find that capsule in the Sahara you've known that my main job is to experiment with space-borne anti-missile systems. When I started getting strange results in my accessibility studies, I just couldn't get anybody interested."

"All right," Pavlos smiled. "Then I am your informal consultant. Now show me these 'strange results' of yours."

Frank pulled a large envelope from his briefcase. He drew the first of several glossy prints from it.

"This is from the same general region, only about thirty kilometers to the southwest of the corner of that large overlay. I want you to take a close look at this area, in particular, before I show you a bigger blowup." Pavlos bent to peer at the plateau Frank pointed



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out, bringing over his magnifying glass.

His smile faded as he studied the photo.

"I cannot say for certain, as your lines of probability get in the way . . . but it appears that this water course loops back upon itself! It makes almost a natural moat around the hilltop."

Frank nodded. "I've tried to use the newer telescope we have onboard. It's tied into our experimental beam weapons system . . ."

Almost unconsciously, Frank looked up and around and lowered his voice, although he knew that Pavlos's apartment was secure.

"I could literally count the number of black fleas on the backside of a dog with that machine. But it's a bitch and a half getting the thing tuned properly, at this stage. I'm not at all sure I'd be able to devote that kind of time and effort using it on what's essentially a side project, especially when NASA's already paranoid over security. At *least* I'd like to get some sort of preliminary confirmation before taking the risk."

Pavlos nodded. As a reserve NATO officer who occasionally helped out in expeditions to desolate regions, he had seen examples of amazing photography from space. And he had the feeling they hadn't ever shown him all they could do.

"So let us see the best you have." He waved with his right hand as Frank pulled out the second photo. "You have me curious about this mystery of yours."

It showed a plateau in the middle of a set of concentric, parched creek beds, surrounded by rugged, goat-ravaged hills. At the corners of the photo there were signs of humanity, as one would expect everywhere in a land that had been inhabited at high density for four thousand years. In two places there were the ubiquitous shepherd's shacks for overnight shelter. Goat tracks were everywhere.

But in the center all trace of man and animal disappeared. Puzzled, Pavlos peered closer. "Are those . . . ? No, they cannot be."

"What are they, Pavlos?"

Pavlos rubbed his chin. "I believe those are *cedars,* very large, very old cedars, of a kind you can only find in the Caucasus these days . . . or on the estates of old and very wealthy families."

"There are no estates here, Pavlos. What else do you see?"

"There are cypress, and some other large trees I cannot identify, and . . ." He peered closely. "There is a *building* of some kind! There is a large, rectangular structure, mostly shaded by trees!"

Frank stood up straight and tapped the photo.

"See these faint lines? I had the computer draw them along curves of *accessibility,* using a new program I developed. See those gra-



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dients? If all roads lead to Rome, then all roads, all trails—hell, all *goat-tracks* lead *away* from this place! Now how the Hell could anyone have built a thing that size on top of that plateau?"

Pavlos sat back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the tabletop. Then he started rummaging through his jacket pocket for a cigarette.

Only when he had one lit did he get up and start to pace.

"I see two possibilities," he began. "The building may be modern, in which case it may have been prefabricated and taken to the peak by helicopter. The question then would be why? And who would do such a thing? How did they keep it secret?"

Pavlos turned to look at Frank.

"That is the possibility that interests you, is it not? Things like this make intelligence officers sleep poorly."

Frank nodded his head, but said, "No. I tried to interest my superiors but they didn't care at all. They even forbade me to ask the Greek government about it. Our allies are already touchy about the extent to which we can peer down at them. I'm stuck with following this up on my own."

Pavlos nodded. "Ah, to be expected from politicians and soldiers, present company excepted. Well, there is still a second possibility. If the structure is *more* than fifty years old it would have taken fanaticism to build it on that site . . . a brand of fanaticism that has not been seen in this land for many centuries."

"And *that's* the possibility that interests you, isn't it?"

Pavlos had shrugged.

Frank went on. "You'd just love to find an untouched Roman temple, or a pristine Nestorian monastery or hermitage, wouldn't you?"

Pavlos stopped pacing again, took a deep drag from his cigarette, then waved it at his friend.

"I have a feeling I am being persuaded to do something. Is this so?"

Frank had smiled.

Pavlos put away the photos and shouldered his backpack. The pain resumed at once, spreading from his chafed shoulders down his spine and arms. For the ten-thousandth time he wondered what masochism could drive a man who wasn't in the army to put forty pounds on his back and go places a donkey would refuse.

When he reached the site he had chosen he took out his machete, looped it by its thong from his right wrist, and began climbing.



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No classic ascent, this. None of the clean exhilaration of a challenge with goldline, harness, and caribiners, against a bare rock face. The danger here would not be from a single fall—likely to be broken by shrubbery—but from jagged rocks, nasty thorns, poisonous snakes, and plain agony. Cerebration would not help so much as watchfulness and stoicism.

At first the slope was steep. The foliage was thick enough to bar his path, but too poorly rooted to use for support. It came free of its roots in his hand, leaving him teetered on the crumbling soil. Finally he hit on the technique of tearing the bushes free on purpose, opening a path for him to crawl upon.

Soon, however, the slope flattened just enough to give the roots leverage. He found himself again and again forced to take detours which led him inevitably downward. Finally he got down on his stomach to crawl among the burrows and worm holes, shoving upwards by brute force.

It was not the time or place for finesse.

He hacked at roots with the short machete. The tough, springy bushes bled a gooey yellow sap that soon coated his hands with a cloying, binding stickiness.

Perspiration ran in clammy streams along his sides, under the leather jacket. The sun burned down through a muggy haze. The smell of his own sweat mingled with the evil stench of the thorn.

Repetition soon became automatic. Reach, pull, hack, hack again, and again until the plant tears free . . . keep flat, crawl through the gap, ignoring the jutting rocks and jagged root stumps . . . reach, pull, set your legs, hack . . . hack . . . hack . . .

Shortness of breath made him regret his lost youth.

He kept his mind on only one thing. *Take no detours!* Every easier path inevitably led downwards. It became easy to tell which way was the right one. Pavlos looked for the worst, most miserable path. It was invariably correct.

Mercifully, just as he thought he could endure the smell, the ache, the heat and the confinement no longer, he reached a patch of open rock. It was no more than one meter by two, but he fell across it and rolled out of his pack with a groan of relief.

With trembling fingers he pulled out one of his canteens. He filled his mouth, swished the water around, then spat onto his hands and rubbed them on his pants to dislodge some of the sap.

He squinted at the painfully bright, hazy sky.

He wondered if Frank was overhead. If he were using the spy telescope, and happened to have a spare moment to look this way,



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Frank might see him right now.

Pavlos waved languidly at the sky.

Probably not, he thought. He wasn't going to risk getting in trouble until I called from the top.

There was a small transceiver in his backpack that, Frank promised, would be able to reach the Platform whenever it was passing within line of sight. As executive officer of a five-man crew, he would be able to arrange several hours alone with the equipment, while the others slept.

It hurt a little, in a wry fashion, to think of the astronaut whizzing overhead in weightless, air-conditioned comfort, pondering his theories of "accessibility of terrain." Pavlos knew that inaccessibility was, like the texture of a woman, known only through intimate contact.

Right now he was being intimate with "inaccessibility" in a manner that made him think of the Anglo-Saxon expletives he had learned over the years.

One hundred meters, that was all the distance remaining. Pavlos crawled with a sense of dogged martyrdom. He was sure two fingers of his left hand were sprained, if not broken under a stone from a rockslide he'd set off. The other aches were innumerable.

The ascent became a melding of miserable repetition; he would grab, pull, hack, then use the root as a support as he searched for footholds on the flaky slope.

His mind meanwhile walked a random path among fantasies of what he would find at the top.

A pre-Constantinian hermitage, perhaps . . . or even a monastery, untouched for fifteen hundred years because nobody ever happened upon it in all of that time.

Or maybe this was one huge tell—a solid ruin from some ancient fortification. It *did* defend itself well, not by steepness or remoteness or height but by sheer *unpleasantness* . . . a nastiness that deterred even goats.

By the frogs of lower heaven, why not go all the way! This is, perhaps, a covered-up installation of visitors from outer space, who buried one of their starships here when they ran out of tapioca to power it!

Pavlos's foot slipped and the root he clutched barely held as he scrambled, face in the gritty dirt. With a mighty strain, he lifted himself within range of another foothold. It held.

Probably, he thought somewhat dizzily, I will find a helicopter



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landing pad, guard dogs, and an oil tycoon who will have me arrested for trespassing.

Pavlos hardly noticed when the slope began to flatten.

In fact, he felt a momentary panic when his hand reached out for another root and grabbed, instead, only air and then grass.

The cedars formed a pocket forest at the center of the plateau. The grass that surrounded the grove was a subject for speculation. It was thicker and more lustrous than one might expect in this terrain, yet it did not appear to be tended, either. Pavlos saw no sign of a helicopter landing pad.

Not on this side, at least.

He knew he was hardly presentable for knocking on someone's front door. He itched all over. Somehow removing his leather outer garments and tending his wounds had changed the pain from a general background roar that could be ignored, to a set of isolated screaming sensations. He had been injured on other expeditions, of course. Often far worse. But never had he felt so *generally* abused.

He took one last swig from his canteen, then hoisted his pack.

"All right," he mumbled, fighting off dizziness. "This had better be worth it."

The air was cleaner up here, almost tasty. The smell of the cedars was sweet and pleasant. He entered the grove and almost at once saw the outlines of the building through the trees.

He paused for a moment, struggling not to fall to his knees. It couldn't be true!

It was pure beam and column construction. Not an arch could be seen. The columns were Doric, or even pre-Doric—chaste, simple, unadorned, but beautiful. Almost, thought Pavlos, their rounded contours might have been Minoan.

And the lintels resting on the columns! Where the entablature in the Doric order was strictly sectioned into the three horizontal bands of architrave, frieze, and cornice, here there was only one band, carved in intricate figures that seemed to march upon a protruding lip, like the rim of the door-lintel of a Cretan palace.

The structure was obviously designed to stand open to the wind, yet someone after the original builder had chosen to close off the interior in a crude fashion. The openings between the columns were blocked by slabs of white marble, roughly mortared; the flaking remnants of ancient paint still clung in spots.

Pavlos walked forward slowly, silently, as if in fear the sounds of



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his footsteps would blow it all away. He felt telescoped, as he approached—the marble seeming to come to *him,* like the advancing of a dream.

No graffiti . . . no carved names and dates. The figures of heroic horses and feathered men in combat using spears and rounded shields, these had borne no defacement other than that which Time itself had meted.

The warriors, some plumed, some naked to the waist, were of many types. Pavlos saw some that were clearly Minoan and he felt his heart leap. There were others . . . Egyptian of the Old Kingdom, for sure, and . . . Akkadian?

Pavlos approached one of the columns. Gently, he reached out and touched it.

The marble had taken pits and tiny scratches over the centuries. It felt rough, in its underlying smoothness. To him, it had the texture of durability.

The wind sighed through the cedars. It seemed to be speaking to him with the voices of ancient men and women.

"Well, hero. You are here at last. *Come,* and you shall tell us of the changes in the world outside."

Pavlos shook his head to clear it. The voice seemed so real.

"*Come,* hero!"

He turned. Standing at the far end of the row of columns was a woman. She wore a simple garment, bound by a rope belt. Her black hair was braided, though not with great precision.

She smiled, and held out her hand in a gesture of welcome. But as Pavlos felt himself begin to walk—numbly and only partly, it seemed, at his own will—he thought he heard a quiet "clicking" sound, and the sunlight glinted hard into his eyes . . . reflected bitterly by the golden thimble she wore on her finger.

## 2

"This is the back way," she said as she led him up a narrow set of marble steps. "We find it better to bring heroes in here first, and let them browse around the storeroom. They always find something that interests them, and it helps them adjust."

At first he thought she was speaking Katharevusa, the modern Greek dialect almost exclusively used by scholars and intellectuals. But the style and pronunciation were different . . . older. It was almost a bastard classical version she spoke, though his early learn-



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ing in Katharevusa enabled him to understand her.

Why was she playing this language game with him? Was she another discoverer of this place, determined to recreate the original dress and speech of those who first served their gods here? If so, she was a failure. The early priestesses of this temple surely spoke Aechaean, or something even older.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She turned her head from the task of opening the rear door to the temple, and arched an eyebrow at him.

"An odd first question. You may call me Moira, if you wish. Later there will be time for other names, including your own."

There was a moment's flash of humor in her eyes as she spoke, and perhaps a touch of pity, though Pavlos could imagine no justification.

Moira? It had a strange pronunciation. Wasn't that an Irish name? Very odd.

They entered a large chamber that was dimly illuminated by gaps in the marble wall slats and by one flickering oil lamp. The beam and post construction was genuine. A little more than two meters separated each of the simple columns that stood in even rows throughout the interior. Most of the colonnade was used to support row upon row of shelves, upon which piles of dusty memorabilia were lain.

"I will leave you now," the woman said. "You will find food and drink at the far door. Do not pass beyond until you are called, hero."

Again, Pavlos felt the self-assured power in her voice, as well as a benign amusement. He wondered what fanaticism bred such arrogance. He called out to her after she had gone a few meters from him.

"Say, why do you call me 'hero'? That's *not* my name."

She looked at him. The lamplight flickered in her eyes.

"Is it not? How strange that you don't think so. Most heroes know who and what they are. I shall have to ask Clotho to check her pigments."

She left. Pavlos heard a scraping sound, then a sliding as a bolt was placed.

With a sigh he let his pack slip to the ground against one of the pillars, then he sat on it, his back to the cool marble.

This was all too strange to be true. A "genuine" priestess of an ancient cult . . . had she implied there were others? He wondered what cult they had chosen to recreate. What rites?

He was glad he still had his machete.



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He was mildly worried about his frame of mind. Pavlos felt detached, numb, almost as if he were watching these proceedings through a protective barrier of cotton batting. Things were being revealed to him in a dramatic sequence. The next scene obviously called for him poking through the dusty shelves of this storeroom.

Hadn't he been invited to do so? He grunted as he pulled himself up and went to the most rummaged looking of the shelves.

If the storeroom was supposed to catch the attention of heroes, *these* were the shelves which *should* have had the most attention. Pavlos nodded in bemused comprehension. This was the weapons collection.

It was an odd mixture, not in keeping with the apparent classical fixation of the cult. The front shelves held an anachronistic assortment of old, but not archaic weapons. There was a fine old Spanish rapier, resting upon a matchlock musket that had to be five hundred years old, if a day. He blew the dust off of a flintlock pistol and peered past halberds and Turkish helmets in search of the real treasure.

The benumbed haze kept him calm and complacent when—finally—he found what he was looking for.

The bronze was incredibly well preserved. It maintained much of its original shine and hardness. He wiped the dust away from the decorated nasal of the ancient helmet. Its crest of horsehair was still long and stiff, though discolored and flaking. He laid it beside a round shield, three feet across, and a short sword with images of snakes running down the haft.

For a long time he merely looked at them. Then he found the nerve to try on the helm.

It fit perfectly.

The musky odor was oddly compelling.

Carefully, he fought down the thrill of power he felt. He made himself remove it and put it back on the shelf.

Maybe later, he thought.

In the middle of the room, near the hanging lamp, he found the books.

There weren't many. That fit. The type of fellow who would fight both nature and his own instincts to come to this place—whether on a pilgrimage or out of obstinate curiosity—as he had, would not have been likely to carry much reading matter with him.

Pavlos smiled as he returned to his pack and rummaged through the bottom flap. He quickly found the flimsy, air-mail edition of *Le*



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*Monde* which he had purchased at the Hotel International before setting out three days before. He had bought the Parisian paper on an impulse, while stopping off for tobacco. Now he returned to the "library" shelf and carefully placed it next to a small, dog-eared Dutch Bible and a crudely bound volume written in Arabic.

The newspaper looked good, lying there. Some future . . . "hero" . . . would see it and think that a 20th-century Frenchman had been here.

Ah, well, Pavlos thought. That's close enough.

Besides a few Bibles and other apparent guidebooks for a faithful wanderer, there were several crude maps and scrawled notes in many languages. One stretch of vellum came embossed with seals and endorsements. It looked like a treaty of some sort. He could tell that the signatories were Turkish and Italian, but the text appeared to be in some sort of cipher.

He had carelessly flattened one scroll of brittle, burn-etched sheepskin, and read at least twenty lines of very archaic Greek script, before the meter and carriage of the words penetrated to whatever place his critical faculties had taken to hide. He stared down at the ancient libram then, halfway between agony over the damage he had done it with his rough treatment and ecstasy over his discovery.

He read, with mounting excitement, the anguished story of a Titan, chained, yet still defiant.

"Nor yet nor thus is it ordained that fate
These things shall compass; but by myriad pangs
And fortunes bet, so shall I 'scape these bonds:
Art than necessity is weaker far."

"Who, then, is helmsman of necessity?"

"The triform Fates and ever mindful Furies."

"Is Zeus, in might, less absolute than these?"

"Even he the fore-ordained cannot escape."

How easily the classic language read! After all, Pavlos had seen these words before, many times. No one had ever written as once did Aeschylus . . . unless it was that sage, inspired or not, who first



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chanted the rhyme that became Ecclesiastes.

He dared not imagine that Aeschylus himself had burned the words onto the vellum, any more than Jean-Francois Revel had hand-set the newspaper on the shelf, inches away. No, this was surely only a copy of *Prometheus Bound* . . . but it would have to be the oldest copy he had ever seen.

Prometheus, according to the ancient pantheon of Hesiod, had been of the race of Titans, children of the Earth and Sky who preceded Zeus and the other Hellenic gods. When Zeus rebelled, and drove most of the Titans from the face of the Earth, he nevertheless kept Prometheus by his side, for he grew to depend on the advice of the Titan whose name meant "fore-thought."

How mankind came to be was never made clear in Greek legend. His destiny as a thinking being, however, was said to have been the gift of Prometheus. The Titan, in his pity, supposedly lent mankind a sliver of his own power—the fire of imagination, alternately fabled as the skaldic meade of poetry.

For this, Zeus had Prometheus nailed to a rocky crag, where an eagle daily tore at his ever-regenerating flesh.

The story was said to have ended happily. Prometheus was to be released, coming to a reconciliation with Zeus and Man.

Yet that part of the story had never read as convincingly. It was as if Aeschylus had allowed his fixation on the palpable, growing presence of Justice in the world, to prejudice his storytelling. Perhaps he simply couldn't reconcile leaving the archetype of justice and pity stranded for eternity in torment.

Pavlos sniffed. A heady, flavorful aroma suddenly reminded him how hungry he was. He carefully laid the parchment on the shelf and turned to follow his nose.

A tray of roast lamb, still steaming on the spit, lay on a bench by the door the priestess had used to exit. That he had heard nothing didn't surprise Pavlos at all.

The meat was tasty, if somewhat unevenly cooked. He chewed slowly as his mind fell deeper into a paradoxical state of numb, bemused excitement.

Somewhere on that shelf of scrolls might be the *missing* portions of the work of the moralistic, unhappy Aeschylus . . . or of the compassionate, upbeat Sophocles . . . or why not ask for the long-lost Achaean scribblings of Homer himself!?

So many secrets on a shelf of ancient cedar! Could there be a fragment that some Cretan scribe left here, one that might tell of the founding of Knossos or its fall?



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Might there be a tablet that would shed light on who it was, who did whatever deed it was, that caused men to build a legend that became Prometheus?

There were things here for which he knew a hundred men who would gladly kill.

The bronze helm alone was worth a fortune.

All right.

This is not a millionaire's retreat in the hills. It is not an ancient ruin refurbished by a few modern fanatics, recreating an ancient cult.

Everything in this room was left here. And time has touched each of these things hardly at all, since each hero left his contribution to the collection.

Heroes.

Just like me.

Iron slid along granite. The oaken door swung back, scraping noisily on the stone floor. Pavlos stood.

The woman, Moira, regarded him.

"Beginning to adjust at last, I see. But you are a strange one, hero. No souvenirs? Or have you stuffed all of our gems in your backpack, hoping to fool us?"

Pavlos was beginning to understand the condescension and amusement in her voice. It hurt, a little, that she thought him so stupid as to choose the poorest treasures, or to attempt a simple theft. He was tempted to protest, but managed to refrain. She looked at him much as his teacher had when he was five and in nursery school. The analogy was probably not unrealistic.

He tried, and found it easier than he had expected, to meet her gaze. There were lines around her ice-blue eyes that he imagined to come from long, sad laughter. They did not detract from the handsomeness of her high forehead and fine nose. Her carriage was erect and slender, yet there was something in the careless braiding of her hair, or the curve of her ironic smile, that spoke of a burden of waiting that had long passed tedium.

"Are you ready to see more?" she asked.

Pavlos waved his hand in what he hoped was an idly grand gesture. "What else could you have that would astonish me more than this room has?"

She stepped back to hold the door for him.

"Everything else that has ever mattered, hero," she answered softly, but with a vatic tone.



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"Everything else that has ever been."

## 3

Racks filled the rest of the Temple as far as Pavlos could see. Only a few narrow aisles between the columns were not blocked by tier upon horizontal tier of wooden dowelling. There were thirty-three tiers between the stone floor and the dusty, cobwebbed ceiling; and upon every shelf there lay a bolt of shimmering, silky, multicolored cloth.

The arrangement was intricate. As Pavlos walked, peering in the dim light cast by the lamp he held, he puzzled at the way the cloth snaked back and forth over the dowels. Only a few folds lay upon one another on each shelf. Yet the bolt on one shelf connected to those on tiers above and below it.

The long, continuous bolt on his left leapt the aisle high over his head to join the one on his right just under the ceiling.

The colors in the portion overhead were bright and vivid, though the lamp was too dim to bring out the features. Still, something in what little he could see made Pavlos break out in goose-bumps.

It was one gigantic tapestry. Only two meters wide, its length must have been kilometers.

The sense of defensive detachment that had never totally left Pavlos now returned in strength. The hand that reached out to stroke the smooth, cool fabric felt like the hand of another man.

Glass had never been smoother. Mercury could not have been more elusively alive under his touch.

He lifted the top fold and held up the lamp, then bent forward to look into the narrow opening.

The threads were too fine to make out individually, yet he felt sure that, holding his head at the right angle, he could easily pick them out one by one. It was an odd sensation.

The pattern of the threads was unlike any he had ever come upon. The weft twisted with incredible complexity, not only in and out of the warp, but with itself, as well.

The design was intricately abstract at first sight. But there was something in the pattern—the colors and highlights shifted like phosphorous diatoms as he changed position slightly—that seemed hypnotically three-dimensional. Pavlos was reminded of the holograms Frank had showed him. He held the light to one side and squinted at an angle; then his eyes adjusted to the virtual image.



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*L'Shona the war-chief, whose true name was hidden, feared the Powers no more nor less than any normal man. He would die of witchcraft, he knew, as did everyone; and however he died, yes even in battle, his brothers would avenge him by burning a witch. He gave this little thought. The way of the world.*

*But now came word that the great king of the Bantu had had a dream, and wanted L'Shona, whose true name was hidden, to come and help divine its meaning.*

*L'Shona was afraid. For the Fire-Demon had come to him in sleep, as well, and told him that the Bantu must sweep east, into the land of the small wise ghosts. And he had afterwards called in a slave, who he had disembowelled to read his entrails in the sand.*

*And now L'Shona, whose true name was hidden, avoided thinking of his second dream, that the King would do this same thing to him . . . and thought instead of the east, and war.*

Pavlos stepped back and rubbed his eyes.

The image had come and gone in a flash of color and emotion. He had not so much *seen* as felt the emotions of a tribal warrior. He had felt the bright mind, the quick, sad resignation, and the complacent cruelty with which he had dispatched the slave.

Moreover, Pavlos had felt undertones from the dying slave, whose life ended in ignorant terror at L'Shona's hand. Pavlos sensed the presence of others—L'Shona's parents and ancestors; his wives, slaves, comrades and enemies; and his immediate heirs—nearby in either space or time.

He felt a weird certainty that, had he shifted his gaze one iota, during that holographic second, he would have seen . . . felt . . . another instant in the warrior's life, or in the life of a neighbor.

He moved along the aisle until another image flashed at him, unbeckoned.

*Xoatuitl hid under a bale of Amaranth stalks until the cries of the hunters and the screams of the pursued diminished in the distance. Then, with as little sound as he could manage, he crawled out. There was a chance some followers of the Teacher might be rallying by the*



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*lake, where the tools of power were stored. Although he was only twelve, he knew something of their use, and might be able to help them drive back the followers of the Bloodgod.*

*He turned just in time to see the (axe, sword, weapon) . . .*

Pavlos blinked. Suddenly the viewpoint shifted. He was looking through still another pair of eyes, dimmer, and less acute.

*Old Tuitaczpec leaned against the wall of the marketplace, breathing hoarsely through toothless gums. He had not been able to keep up with the mob, and had been left to use his (axe, club, indeterminate weapon) upon the prone bodies of wounded followers of the feathered serpent. It was not enough. He wanted vengeance on them, for seducing his grandson away from the old ways of the Bloodgod.*

*When he saw a head emerge from under a bale of Amaranth, he gleefully took the opportunity . . .*

The next time Pavlos blinked he saw an overview. The small section of tapestry he looked upon was colored a sanguinary red. He felt almost overcome by the lust of one half of a city to kill the other half. Taken at a distance, the scene was almost beautiful, in a dreadful, poignant fashion.

A small shift of his eyes told a sad irony: that this civil war would lead, within a year, to the fall of the city to barbarians from the north. A centimeter downward, the color red overwhelmed all other shades.

There was, in fact, a lot of red everywhere he looked. Bright, sudden patches flashed at him as battles and burnings. Pink tintings leapt out as oppression and grief.

There were other shades. In fact, Pavlos thought he saw a perpetual effort, in greens and browns of health and chaste blues of thought and art . . . and especially in the shades of humor and courage, to force the weave in another direction altogether.

The conflict created a blend of terrible, tragic beauty. The tapestry, as a whole, made him ache inside. The stories leapt at him, individually and in groups, comprising a sum of melancholy that finally made him close his eyes.



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"Moira," he whispered.

The pronunciation had fooled him. It was not a borrowed, foreign name. It was an honorific. A title.

"Yes," she said beside him. "I am She Who Walks, who travels . . . or used to. Come now, hero. You must meet the Three. The Three-Who-Weave wish to look upon you."

## 4

Once upon a time the three old crones may have stood at a crude, warp-weighted loom, much as did Arachne . . . or Penelope, weaving as she waited for Ulysses. Now they sat on padded stools. Their broad, vertical floor-loom looked no more than a few centuries old. Perhaps some visiting hero had been a skilled carpenter, and knocked it together for them before he . . .

Before he what? None of the possible scenarios Pavlos could imagine coming out of this meeting included his being allowed to leave. They had some use for him, to be sure, these ancient meddlers. And they'd had long practice dealing with "heroes" who wanted to take home souvenirs and a story.

Moira beckoned him forward to be presented, but Pavlos interrupted before she began the introductions, partly to keep from falling into another awe-struck trance.

"I know their names." He gestured to the old "woman" who sat a bit apart from the loom, with a basket full of wooly skeins at her feet and bottles of dye at her side. She rhythmically drew threads from the basket, winding each on a wooden frame, then painting on various colors with a blur of brevity. On finishing each, she wound the thread quickly onto a bobbin.

Something about her activity struck Pavlos as—strange. It was as if he watched a stroboscopic image—like that of a top spinning or an engine turning—and for every "thread" he saw painted and wound, a thousand were actually handled.

"Your name is Clotho," he said. She smiled at him crookedly, apparently giving him her entire attention, yet never stopping her work.

"You have also been called Urda, and U-dzu. You prepare the thread."

He turned to the weaver. She was the oldest hag. She looked as frail as a springtime icicle . . . as thin and friable as late summer grass.



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"This is Lachesis," he went on, pointing to the weaver, who didn't even glance at Pavlos. Her hands dipped, with the same stroboscopic effect, into a bag on her lap, constantly bringing forth fresh bobbins of thread, tying the free ends into place upon the tapestry, then flying among the innumerable bobbins, weaving them amongst each other and the straight strands of warp.

"Her name means she-who-knows-sorrow. She has also been called Verdani. The Norsemen knew her, as well."

The third crone actually paused in her work, and grinned at Pavlos maliciously. She seemed the youngest of the three, though nowhere near as fresh as Moira. She was the first to speak.

"Well-educated, aren't you, hero? Then you know, of course, what these are?"

She held a pair of bronze cloth-shears up to the filtered afternoon light from outside. The sight of them made Pavlos want to quail, but he made himself stand erect instead.

"I know what they are, Atropos. You seem to be a bit lazy in their use, right now."

The third hag frowned for a moment. But Clotho immediately exploded in mirth. She put down her work and cackled dryly, slapping her thighs. Slowly, Atropos resumed her cruel smile.

"Very brave and humorous, hero. When Moira told us of you, we thought you were one of the weak ones. Perhaps not."

Her Greek was even more archaic than Moira's. Pavlos had to concentrate to understand the heavily inflected speech.

"You are right," Atropos went on. "I am lazy because Lachesis, my dear sister," she motioned to the weaver, who never once looked up, "has this last century insisted that I give her more length in the average thread . . . even though they are more numerous than ever. Clotho and I have been humoring her, though it is *we* who will decide when this silly phase comes soon to end."

With that she grimaced and leaned over to snip with the shears. With each "click" a rain of tiny bobbins fell to the floor. Pavlos winced as the clacking speeded up to a high pitched burr.

"Well!" Clotho cried out. "Now comes the part I like second best! Now that introductions are over, hero, what is your first remark?"

She sat expectantly, like an artist expecting adulation, but equally willing to accept vehement detestation as a form of praise.

Pavlos forced himself to answer, feeling a desperate need to maintain momentum until he had a chance to think.

"Your job was to prepare the thread that makes up the length and tone of a man's life. I'd like to know *how* you accomplish that."



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The hag was startled for a moment. The expression looked so unaccustomed on her toothless, satisfied face, that Pavlos felt an instant's triumph. Any uncertainty he caused these Furies was a momentary victory for his sanity.

"The first!" she cried. "The first hero to ask me that!

"Always they ask the *stupid* questions, like 'Who gave you the right!' . . . or '*Why?*' . . ." Her voice became mockingly querulous.

Pavlos remained silent. Those were the questions he had wanted to ask next.

"At last a *practical* hero!" Clotho went on. "No prayers to the dead little gods, or futile attempts to exorcise us by calling on One who is *too* big, and has forgotten we exist . . . no, *this* hero has gained my favor! Come, hero! I will show you how it is done!"

She reached for his hand. When she touched it Pavlos felt a brief thrill of power, as if her aura was something palpable and electric.

But her skin felt rough and dry. Her grip was very strong as she pulled him out the broad portico and down the marble steps of the front face of the temple, into the late afternoon shadows.

He was almost dragged through an overgrown carpet of grass and native flax, across an open area toward a forest-shrouded building on the other side.

A small tholos, a roofed circle of marble columns, faced the temple across the open meadow. It stood beneath a great cedar, the largest Pavlos had ever seen. The fluted pillars of the ancient building were laced with almost microscopic filigree. But in between, the openings were blocked by massive slabs of undressed stone, which clashed with the original design.

With surprising agility, the ancient Fury dragged him along, up the short stairs to the narrow portico. There she stopped him and motioned him to be still as she dragged aside a granite stone blocking the doorway.

Clotho looked quickly about the rim of the opening, as if watching for something trying to escape. When finally satisfied she grinned at him and crooked a finger in sly invitation.

"So you wanted to see how it begins, did you? Then look!" she hissed. "No more than a handful of men have ever seen what you now see!"

Pavlos peered into the dimness. Outside of the trapezoid of light cast on the floor by the doorway, the interior was gloomy as a starless night.

Yet, off towards the back, there seemed to be a faint glow. It shimmered with a suggestion of an outline that changed before he



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could grasp it. His mind tried, and failed to form a straightforward image.

"It looks like . . . like a hole. Yes, it's like a deep hole in space, but with a hint of light at the end. It feels like I'm trying to see through my blind spot."

"Blind spot . . . hole in space, yes! Yes!" she cried. "You fool! Idiot! You are the smartest of all your race of apes to visit us, and *still* you don't recognize this?"

She whacked him on the arm hard enough to nearly knock him over. He would develop a welt from that blow.

Smartest of all? No, Pavlos thought. I'm merely the latest. I'm probably the first who's been here who has heard of Einstein . . . who knows, at least in abstract, that space has shape and texture, almost like her "cloth." I've heard of black holes and anti-matter, and I've seen all of the special effects in those American science fiction films. Perhaps that has prepared me.

But prepared me to do what? To make glib theories, for sure. I can think of a half-dozen fanciful concepts to explain this, whereas all the other heros had to think in terms of "miracles" and "magic."

Big deal, as Frank would say. Perhaps they were better off at that.

The hag pointed at the shimmering, burning blackness at the rear of the building. Pavlos turned to look at her, feeling the cottony numbness pack more fully than ever around his mind.

"That's where *you* come from, hero." She announced with dry satisfaction.

"See the threads? You probably can't, with them in their natural colors, and not gathered into skeins or bobbins. But if I let them, they would fly free into the sky, to tangle with each other as they would . . . each the essence of a human soul, good for a hundred years or perhaps more!

"Some do get away. A few fly off to annoy us . . . some become 'great teachers and leaders' . . ." Her voice became thick with sarcasm. "We manage to kill them off eventually by finding the part of the tapestry which avoids control, where there is a gap that influences the threads around it. Then we choke it off, at last."

"But where . . . ?"

"Fool! Look at it! It is a gateway that was pushed into this world . . . *my* world . . . fifty thousand years ago!" Clotho shook her fist into the gloom, menacingly.

"We greeted their emissaries courteously, at first . . . or as courteously as they had any right to expect. Oh they were great ones for having ideas. Claimed to be as old as we were and interested in



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learning from us. They settled down here and soon began meddling with our human pets! They said humans showed 'promise'!"

Clotho sniffed.

"Oh you were fairly bright. How you worshiped us! But naturally you lacked the Spark. No ambition at all. No curiosity. And your lives were shorter than this!" She snapped her fingers. "Well our visitors wanted to give you some experience with the Spark. They said that if you were given some for a while, along with guidance, you'd start making it yourselves. Hah!

"Oh, we cooperated, for a time, though you never *did* seem about to learn anything. Finally we started to argue over what *kind* of experience humans needed.

"Zeus agreed with us . . . at first . . . him in his sky tower with his thunderbolts . . ."

"Zeus!"

"Aye," she looked at him archly. "He was their leader. A tricky devil, and worse still with the one you now call Prometheus at his side. He was strong, too. Like the time he helped us do in Aesclepius . . . but he went sissy in the end, like the rest of his folk."

"You mean the ancient Greek deities all had some basis in—"

"Who said *all* of them! I'm being kind to a smartaleck hero by telling it in a way he can understand! Like wearing this *shape* was originally for you humans' benefit, until we grew accustomed to it and found that it suited our purposes.

"Anyway, who cares what their names were! We killed them all in the end, is all that matters! Or drove them back through their hole. They got most of us, too; but still we won!"

She crowed and shook her fist at the sky.

"The hole's still open," Pavlos pointed out. "Is this other ancient race responsible for the threads?"

Clotho paused to look at him, head cocked, as if torn between ripping him to shreds for his insolence, or rewarding him for being clever.

"Yes!" she hissed. "We can't close it, or keep them from maintaining a narrow contact with your race. They send a thread of Spark for every human child born, without which you'd all be animals again! Each thread is tied to a life. Break a man's thread, and he dies!"

Pavlos nodded. "Then you *are* the Fates, the Norns—"

"True enough. And we use their 'gifts' as we wish. We're making a *beautiful* tapestry out of the threads. When we're finished, we'll wipe out every last one of you, and stuff it down that hole to show



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them what became of their 'Grand Experiment'!"

Her laughter was shrill and loud. It grew and grew until Pavlos had to retreat with his hands over his ears. The sound chased him down the steps and out onto the lawn. When it finally subsided, he could feel still the echo vibrating in his bones.

He looked back once, as he trudged in the gathering twilight toward the main temple. Clotho was still inside the smaller building. He caught a glimpse of her, surrounded by a fiery nimbus as she leaped and hopped about the chamber, grabbing nothings out of mid-air and stuffing them into a bag.

## 5

Pavlos slowly felt a return of lucidity. He had recollections of wandering in the storeroom in back, searching among the memorabilia . . . for what, he couldn't remember. He recalled walking among the great stacks of folded tapestry, drifting dazedly, open to the holographic images that flashed at him from the past.

And he remembered, in the storeroom, pawing through his pack, inspecting each item, as if for the first time. For an hour he shouted into the transceiver, screaming what would have to be incoherence to his friend the astronaut. Frank never replied.

He had probably been out of line of sight. Or perhaps the ancient mountain was shielded, somehow.

And maybe it was best Frank hadn't heard him, after all.

For a while he watched Clotho at work, affixing her dyes to overlay the natural colors of the threads she had harvested. Finally, he sickened of her happy labor and went out into the night for a walk.

He had only their word for it they were immortal.

He wondered about that. He still had his machete; and, except for Moira, they looked like helpless old women. He had never killed before; but he had been willing to in the past, in border skirmishes and on expeditions into lawless lands. Surely he had the will now.

But Clotho had been terribly strong. And then there were the other heroes to consider.

Surely some of *them* had tried frontal assault. Obviously none had succeeded.

Similarly, escape was probably impossible. It was too obvious an idea. All they had to do, probably, was have Atropos pick out his thread from amongst the five billion and snip it. He would fall in



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the darkness, or be bitten by a snake, and that would be that.

Morosely, he looked up at the sky, with the bitterly clear stars shining overhead. Mount Ossa bulked darkly against the distant skyline.

He considered prayer. It might be worth it to make the effort, he thought. But the same logic held. It was an obvious thing to try . . . and had never worked, apparently.

Pavlos had never been a religious man. Nevertheless, he cast his thoughts outward for a brief time. It brought upon him a poignancy like nothing he had ever known; but when he turned around, the predicament remained the same.

With shoulders hunched, he turned away from the chill and slowly climbed the broad steps into the temple. Moira awaited him, standing a few feet from the loom where Lachesis and Atropos continued their labors untiring.

He watched them for a while. Lachesis's hands were a blur, yet there was a fascination to the rhythmic pattern of her movements. He tried to see the beauty translating from the whirling motions of her hands to the pattern of the weave, but was distracted by the incessant clicking of Atropos's shears. He couldn't make himself believe that he was seeing his own contemporary human society in the making, from moment to moment before him, in the microscopic lengthening of the abstract pattern.

"Lately some of the patterns have developed a degree of spontaneity," Moira said from beside him. "Not only are there more threads than ever, but Lachesis seems to have been giving them their head in contacting one another. It makes little sense, geographically. People seem to be on the move, more . . . and the rate of travel has surprised us."

"I thought you controlled everything we do," Pavlos said bitterly.

"That is true to an extent," Moira agreed, "though what is controlled consists primarily in who a person meets during his life—Lachesis handles this by having thread contact thread—and in the way men feel about one another when they meet. That part is managed by Clotho's dyes. Finally does Atropos choose the moment of death, constrained by the pattern in the tapestry.

"Thus it is Clotho, primarily, who drives the theme of mankind's weaving, for her colors constrain Lachesis to fit them together in a pattern that has meaning. Of late, however, our eldest sister seems to have become more imaginative in her patterning, causing threads to hop about like fleas upon a rug. We do not know why she is moving you humans about the world so, these days . . . Lachesis has



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not spoken to us for centuries, now. We are very interested in finding out how you are managing it physically. That is one reason why Clotho was so glad to learn that a hero had finally come."

Pavlos paused.

"You mean you don't know—?" Then he stopped. By lamplight he saw something he had not noticed before. Four very large bobbins hung at the edge of the tapestry. Their size alone was hint enough, but when he saw the long, totally straight trace of those threads, visible among all of the others and leading interminably back into the weave, Pavlos felt a cold elation.

With a cry he leapt forward, the machete gleaming bright in his hand. He siezed the large bobbins in his left hand and brought the machete down with all his might.

He felt a slicing . . . a sudden parting. His blood surged with a battle fever. But when he looked down he saw the stump that his blade had become. Four gleaming pieces of steel lay on the ground.

He opened his left hand. The four large bobbins were intact, still connected by thread to the loom. But also in his palm was a curling mass of tiny tendrils, attached to tiny balls smaller than ants.

There was the sound of thunder.

Lachesis finally took notice of him, barely. Almost as an afterthought, she pushed him aside. The force sent him reeling, the bobbins torn from his grasp. He slipped on the smooth marble floor and skittered until he tumbled, jarringly, into a massive pillar.

Atropos laughed.

"Good try, hero! Only one in ten thinks of that! And only a few are strong enough to break steel on us!"

Moira came up to him, smiling with a certain degree of pity. She offered her hand. It was such a natural gesture that Pavlos took it, unconsciously. His ears were ringing and the rumble of thunder was growing.

Atropos peered at the section of the weave he had attacked. "And a stronger hero, even still! Not strong enough to break *our* threads, I fear . . . but the first in a long time strong enough to snap a few *humans* he grabbed along by mistake!"

"What?" Pavlos felt dizzy. Suddenly he remembered the curling wisps, the tiny, ant-like bobbins in his hand.

"As I see it," Atropos looked closely. "You snipped almost a hundred of them . . . not more than a few leagues from here!"

She sounded impressed. Pavlos stared.

The growling sound drifted in from the open portico, now punctuated with distant coughs and pops. Only slowly did Pavlos come



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to recognize it. With leaden footsteps, he followed it outside.

Flame leapt from a mountainside no more than twenty miles away. Several explosions followed one another, pealing across the hills like funeral drums. The tiny speck flickered with a hot, blue tint for long minutes, before settling down to a lingering, crimson flame.

". . . a plane crash," Pavlos muttered to himself, the cottony numbness gathering around him once again in a protective embrace. "Something straying from the main routes . . . maybe a military jet."

Moira stood beside him, watching the disaster slowly burn down. Finally she asked,

"What is a 'plane'? And what *is* a—a 'military jet'?"

## 6

Pavlos rubbed his eyes, peered about him in the gloom of the storeroom, and wondered how long he had been asleep. He sat by the eastern wall, in a circle of helmets, scrolls, ancient artifacts, and articles from his pack. He remained where he was, letting his eyes rest on each item in turn.

Weapons, texts, personal items from a hundred brave men. Each must have striven in his own way to overcome the ancient creatures who dwelt here. And each instead served them by reporting the state of the world he knew.

His gaze fell on the transceiver, still turned on and apparently operational, yet also apparently useless. Frank had never answered. Now Pavlos hoped he never would. If he heard Pavlos's story he would undoubtedly think his friend delirious, and have a helicopter sent out.

The helicopter would, of course, burn like the jet did, as would anything humanity sent against these hags.

The door at the far end scraped open. Footsteps whispered softly in the dust, and Moira appeared at the end of a nearby aisle.

"Atropos and Clotho want to see you," she said.

"What do they want?"

Moira shrugged. "They will want to ask you questions, to have all of your knowledge. They are curious about some of the changes that have taken place in the physical lives of men."

Pavlos held the bronze helmet on his lap, fingering the design along its crest. "How can you manipulate us without knowing any-



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thing about our science, our machines . . . our weapons?"

"They hardly matter, do they?" she sighed. "Have they changed your emotions? The way you treat each other? The savagery and misery—"

"Which Clotho colors in!"

"Which she only exaggerates! They are there *anyway*, to a lesser extent!" Moira snapped. There was power in her voice, and irritation. Pavlos also thought he detected a note of defensiveness. "It would be impossible for her to corrupt you if you had not the seeds already, in copious supply!"

Pavlos looked down, avoiding her gaze.

Moira glared for a moment, then shrugged again.

"We were surprised, three heroes ago, to learn of gunpowder. The last hero told us of steamships. Clotho added some new pigments to see what wars would match the scale of your new toys. The pattern of the weave became more uniform."

She looked pensive, for a moment.

"I will admit that I've become curious, these last few years. The number of new threads Clotho collects shows a massive birthrate, as if you humans were testing our power, somehow.

"And there have been times when I have seen things in the sky, like the rocs of elder days; things that fly growling through the sky. I have recently come to think that they might not be natural, but something caused by man. Are they these 'planes' you spoke of? They fly so swift and free . . ." Her expression grew distant. ". . . much as *I* once flew, before the war that brought down Zeus's sky tower and ended the glory of my race."

Pavlos hardly paid attention to her words; he remembered something she had said earlier:

*"Clotho added some new pigments to see what wars would match the scale of your toys."*

No wonder we've gone so long without nuclear war, he thought. In our natural hues we're too sensible to go *that* far. *Now*, though . . .

Pavlos shook himself away from that thought. He looked up at Moira. "Where do *you* fit into all this?" he asked. "Your name, I know—"

"Means 'Fate', yes. Another of your nations called me 'Nemesis'." Her eyes seemed to shine, as she remembered. "When we agreed, at first, to the experiment proposed by the emissaries from the Other Place, I was the one who was the most enthusiastic. I worked with the emissary whom you now call Prometheus. I weeded and pruned. I ran to and fro across the globe, tending mankind like my own



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personal garden.

"You needed so much work, in the beginning." Moira smiled distantly. "It is true that the Spark of Imagination and Ambition needs practice. Your ancestors were always hiding from it, or misusing it terribly. They wasted it on 'magic tricks' and mental powers for which they were simply unready. It took us long to suppress those powers deep within you, until such a time as you were ready for them.

"Yet still I remember the most precocious of my children. Asclepius, who had so much Spark of his own that he had to be destroyed. Alcestis, who spontaneously invented self-sacrifice, something we had never known. And sweet Odin, who visited me when I was Mimir, sitting by the gateway beneath the Great Tree, long before the terrible war, and offered me his eye for wisdom."

Moira frowned.

"Then came the day when Zeus declared you ready, and my sisters became afraid. Even *I*, your eldest mother, who was Gaea and Demeter and Amaterasu, thought you were unripe and dangerous.

"I *helped* my elder siblings pull down the Sky Tower and drive Prometheus into the Gateway. The last I saw of him was his smile. He winked at me, then disappeared. Within a day, the threads began arriving; and Clotho found she no longer had the power to end your race, merely to warp it.

"To do even that much we had to make our transumptive personas almost real. To gain control over the potency of the Threads, we were forced to weave *ourselves* into the Tapestry, giving, for this epoch, our very lives into yarn to be woven therein.

"Is it any wonder, then, that my sisters and I grow bored or bitter at the passage of time? There was a sweetness that I once knew, in wearing this form, and now I cannot remember it. Now even a rare visitor excites in me no more than a vague unease . . . and a wish that somehow this labor can come to an end."

Pavlos began to speak; but, looking at her distant, unfocused gaze, something powerful stopped him. It was as if his ancestors had reached out to stifle him with a warning. Something of the experience of his forebears told him it was better to stay small and quiet during the confession of a goddess.

As if to verify this, Moira's eyes shifted to gaze upon his. They were now steely and alert. If lightning had flashed from them he would not have been surprised.

"So get thee up, thou lean-thighed Athenian, and bring your toys to demonstrate them," she said. "You will get to ask of us one great



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reward, as heroes are privileged to do, before giving us your mind and becoming immortal in our memories."

Pavlos hurriedly swept the items on the floor together and stuffed them into his pack. At this stage disobedience was the farthest thing from his mind.

## 7

"This is your life!" the Fate cried. Atropos held a tiny bobbin in her hand. She grinned at him and raised her shears high. They glinted in the half-light already streaming in from the pre-dawn sky.

"Look at it! Do you see the colors? Some of Clotho's pigments scraped off of this one, as they sometimes do. Or more likely such a strong thread shook them off by itself! And you doubted yourself a hero!"

Pavlos squinted. The thread was almost invisible. By rights it should be, in order to fit into a tapestry with five billion others. But he was beginning to understand the odd way in which subjectivity operated here.

He squinted, tilting his head from left to right, and did catch an occasional flash of color. He found it hard to pay attention, though. Irrelevant memories interfered with his concentration.

He recalled the prideful ownership of his first knife . . . the time he was lost in the woods for two days and came home with a wounded fox kit that became his pet for a year . . .

There was the shame of being caught cheating on a third-grade exam . . . the glory of serving on the honor guard at an all-Europe Boy Scout Jamboree . . . his first love . . . his first expedition across the Deccan of India . . . his third love . . . his missions for NATO . . .

Suddenly he recognized what was happening to him. He tore his gaze from the tiny thread, and laughed. The flood of memories cut off at once. He threw his head back and laughed richly.

"A hero's reaction." Clotho nodded. Even Lachesis looked up at him from her innumerable bobbins and regarded Pavlos for a moment. She gave his laughter a dim, satisfied smile that lasted only an instant. Then the dour expression returned and she went back to work.

"Just remember this, hero," Atropos said as he subsided to a broad grin. "I hold the shears. You will now pay the price heroes pay, by giving us your mind and memory. Do not be tempted by rash



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thoughts. You already know that you cannot harm us, but if you try, and do any more damage to the tapestry than you did last night, I can snap your thread as quickly as I cut this one . . . or this one . . . or this one . . ."

The shears flashed, and each severed thread gave off a tiny spark as it expired.

"Stop!" Pavlos cried.

Atropos arched her brows.

"Yes, yes I understand," Pavlos said, hurriedly. "You don't have to kill anyone else to demonstrate your power!"

The crone smiled. "They were doomed anyway. But *you* will have a form of immortality, living forever in the minds of my sisters."

A dubious home for all eternity, Pavlos thought. I'd rather spend it in a cesspool.

"What was this about a reward?" he asked. "Don't I get some sort of prize for coöperating?"

Lachesis grumbled. She bent forward over the loom, muttering to herself. Atropos smiled. Clotho put her arm around her elder sister's shoulder, then grinned at Pavlos.

"Poor Lachesis. She hates this part. It always makes more work for her.

"Yes, hero. You may choose anything that is in our power to give . . . providing it does not thwart our purpose, changes your commitment to us not at all, and takes no more than a twentieth part of the day to fulfill."

"That leaves a lot of choice," Pavlos said sarcastically.

"Heroes usually ask some favor for one they love, or for the city or country of their birth. We can do all of this for you, hero! Think of your loved ones! It would amuse us to do you, the finest hero we have had in many centuries, the favor of a long and prosperous life for your children. Should your city prosper? Know that the *net* suffering around the world shall remain the same, but for some years your homeplace will be joyful!

"Choose your favor, hero! You have won our hearts and will not be denied!"

And if Clotho's ancient, puckered face were capable of affection and generosity, it showed them now.

Pavlos hesitated.

He was being offered a great prize indeed. It was a clever one, as well.

If he chose, for instance, to ask for another Golden Age in Athens, he was certain the city would indeed, see some return to great-



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ness . . . to whatever extent it would not interfere with these Norns' overall plan for this era.

Or he could ask to have his favorite nephew, Theagenis, cured of his emphysema and go on to become the Olympic runner he dreamed of becoming.

But whatever he asked for, someone unknown to him would suffer to counterbalance the boon he handed out. And there was another disadvantage. Anything they gave him could be readily repealed if he succeeded in killing himself.

In the feathery unreality of his encounter with the Fates, he now found a plan crystallizing with stark and terrible clarity.

The one advantage humanity had, at the moment, was its new technology. It was no accident, he now saw, that so much had been learned by men in the short time since these creatures had last been visited by a hero. The Spark itself was making a countermove, at last.

It was a weak move, at best. Clotho, Atropos and Lachesis could stave off anything, even a nuclear strike, by merely sensing an intent in the weave and severing the instigators from the tapestry.

Still, they knew less about humanity now than they had in millennia. They were confused geographically and technically. If the trend could continue while they stayed complacently ignorant of what was going on for another century . . . until another "hero" came. . . .

By then there might be colonies on Mars . . . or psychics, trained through biofeedback to hide their thoughts . . . perhaps those hidden mental powers Moira had mentioned might have a flowering, if given only a few more decades free from knowledgable interference.

As a hero he knew his model had to be Thermopylae. His job was simply to buy time.

"I know what I want as my boon," he said at last.

"I want none of the things you mentioned, for even I will admit the esthetic beauty of this tapestry. I do not love Clotho for her dyes of cruelty and hate, nor Atropos for her untimely knife, but I would regret seeing Lachesis's lovely patterns wrecked for the sake of a selfish wish. Those I love will care for themselves and each other . . . fate permitting."

Atropos and Clotho stared at him. Moira looked puzzled. Lachesis cast him a sidelong glance. For a brief instant he thought he saw a smile flicker before she returned to the weave. Twice for one hero, Pavlos thought. The others will think you're flirting, dear.



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"Then what is your boon?" Clotho asked sharply. "Do not ask for what we cannot give. You know the conditions!"

Pavlos bowed his head.

"I understood the conditions. My request will easily fall under them.

"All I want is to sit before this great loom, out in the sunshine, and contemplate the very latest work that you have done."

"No!" Atropos cried. She hissed at Pavlos and waved the shears dangerously close to his bobbin. "We will not take the loom outside!"

"But why not?" he asked. "You are all strong enough. And it won't interrupt your work for more than a few minutes."

Pavlos tried to stay calm outside. Internally he was shivering. Now he had to stand by it, but that part about taking the loom outside had only been an afterthought, suggested against the vague chance that Frank might see something of sufficient strangeness, from his eyrie in space, to make him think twice about sending a search party after his missing friend. If, by some miracle, the American had heard Pavlos's earlier rantings, or was picking up this very conversation via the transceiver in Pavlos's backpack, he just might add two and two and have the wisdom to keep his mouth . . . his very *mind* shut about this plateau for the rest of his life.

Anyway, he had made his request; now he had to stand by it.

"Besides," he said, "you ladies all look as if you could use some fresh air!"

Moira laughed.

"He's right, sister. You act as though we were still at war and had to hide from Zeus's sky tower. How long has it been since you saw some sun?"

Her manner was hearty. Yet Pavlos thought he detected a hidden note of uncertainty in her voice.

"Clotho and I make the decisions here," Atropos threatened. "We outvote you, young Nemesis, remember?"

With a whoop and a cackling laugh, Lachesis stood up. She seemed so frail and tottering that a small breeze might blow her over, yet she beamed and her eyes danced with deviltry.

Pavlos was only slightly more shocked than the others when the frail old Fury stooped, grunted, and lifted the loom into the air.

Moira shouted with delight and ran to keep the tapestry from tangling as it fed out behind the loom. Pavlos took a position by Lachesis' side. Not knowing whether she heard him or not, he kept up a running set of instructions to guide her down the steps.

His old scoutmaster would have been proud.



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Stunned, Atropos was forced to drop Pavlos's bobbin and step back. The eldest Norn walked bithely past her and out onto the lawn.

The sun was just rising as Lachesis set the loom to Earth. She straightened and dusted her hands. For just an instant Pavlos saw somewhat beyond her apparent form, and was struck by the stark, blue power and clarity of her aura . . . pulsing in momentary visibility around her.

Then, just as suddenly, she was an old crone once more. With a cackling grin, she stood aside and bowed to him. Moira came up, carrying a stool, and set it before the loom.

Pavlos stood still for a minute. His fate was set. In his case it was a path of his own choosing. Heroes were unique in that fashion, he now realized. He would sacrifice himself in a useless delaying action, but not by their whim. Heroes alone picked their own way of ending.

Another thing. No other hero had so upset this household. He was sure of that. Atropos and Clotho would not soon forgive him for what he had done and would do this day.

He felt a great wash of *appropriateness* as he shrugged off his pack. He upturned the rucksack, spilling the contents on the ground.

With great dignity he stooped and brought up the helm of Theseus. Before sitting on the padded stool he carefully placed it over his head.

"Now," he commanded. "Please be so kind as to point out Athens for me."

*Bustling, crowded, noisy streets . . . Everywhere the dawn colors, grey and brown, blending with the soot and smoggy haze . . . babies crying . . . street vendors calling . . . a worker wandering home drunk, praying that he won't be possessed by the evil again and beat his wife and children . . . the dreams . . . the dreams of millions of people soon to awaken. Dreams that twist and curl and wave like smoke . . . like drifting, myriad strands of thread, struggling to cut loose and fly. . . .*

*Elsewhere; patricians arguing . . . soldiers dying . . . fanatics of every stripe, free to choose whatever extreme ideology fit, so long as it matched the fanatical dye . . . and many good men and women here and there, whose minds would cloud briefly, long enough to make some colored-in mistake. . . .*

*Hatreds persistent in spite of reason . . . love and honor persisting*



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*as well . . . beauty trying, an echo, ineradicable, of hope. . . .*

The images leapt at Pavlos, filling his brain with more information than he ever thought he could handle. He saw not through people's eyes, but their hearts; and the cumulation of power coursed through him like a hot flux.

He reached out and caressed the pattern, and somehow he felt the individual threads, their textures, their will to fly.

His hand, unguided, passed over and held one thread, floating above the others. It was not his own, he could tell, but one with whom he felt a kindred current. He ran his fingernail along its side, and was surprised to find that the paint flaked off like a moulted skin.

"Enough!" Atropos shook his shoulder. She had joined them at last, a heavy shawl over her head.

"You have been sitting there, talking to yourself, for two sixtieths of the daylight. That's all we can spare you. Get up, so we can move the loom back inside and begin our questioning!"

Pavlos blinked. Was that all the time it had been? It had felt like forever. So many things he had witnessed . . . things taking place in the world right now.

The cruelties were unchanged from those he had seen in the racks. They were larger, more subtle, perhaps . . . more indiscriminate. But the tapestry showed that the old evils were persistent.

Yet something was different. The pattern of the weave, for sure, was opening up, reflecting man's new mobility.

But hidden in the opening was something else. Something Pavlos could not readily define, but something he was determined to protect.

He sighed. Well, at least he had kept the world free of their meddling for a few minutes. It was a good thought.

And now it was time to go.

Atropos stood nearby, holding what he supposed was his bobbin. Pavlos rose and bowed respectfully to Lachesis. "Thank you. I now know that it is the dye to blame. Your pattern is lovely."

Clotho, veiled as Atropos, snorted. But Lachesis smiled.

"With your permission," he went on. "I would like to touch the weave one last time."

The eldest nodded with permission even before Atropos could object.

He stepped up to the loom and ran his hand along the surface, right to left.

Five billion threads.



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Atropos held her shears up next to his own thread. His hand approached hers.

The color of the threads guided him. One large spool held thread the color of spite, the other that of contempt. He grabbed those, ignoring the other two, and pulled.

The threads stretched as he leapt backwards and, for an instant, he felt triumphant as Clotho and Atropos staggered.

But the tension held when he had pulled two meters taut. Try as he might, he could stretch no further.

Atropos regained her balance. Her nimbus became visible, a fiery dirty yellow. She hissed at him.

"You try to tweak our noses? Why, hero? You know you cannot harm the threads without a more powerful weapon than you have. One of your guns might, but you have none. So why do you *ask* for the mercy of my knife?"

She pondered for a moment.

"That's *it,* isn't it? You *want* to end your existence before we can question you! Clotho! Go and get your dyes! This one knows something. I shall enjoy tearing it out of him!"

Pavlos felt despair. His plan had failed and worse. He didn't doubt Clotho's power to make him do whatever she wished.

Could he reach his own bobbin and cut it himself?

As if sensing his desperate thoughts, Atropos snorted her contempt and threw his thread down into the jumbled mass along the weave. Never in a century could he find it himself.

Quickly, he looked about for an alternate plan. He saw the tholos, the small shrine, by the great cedar, only a hundred meters away across the grassy meadow. If he could get inside and launch himself into the "other universe" . . . ? It might be possible even to survive, to get help, as well as deny the Fates his mind.

Pavlos's shoulders slumped. He remembered the size of the granite slab that blocked the doorway. By the time he moved it, if he could budge it at all, Clotho and Atropos could physically capture him.

Clotho approached, two bottles in her hand. An instinct he never knew he had told him the colors were Torment and Submission.

In an instant, he knew at last what a hero was. A hero died of no wound in the back. A hero was a gesture . . . a defiance. In moments he might be their willing slave, but for now he had the Spark, and speech.

*"Cavernous shades! You dotard remnants of a wrong path taken! Know this! That you have kept the child restrained too long! That*



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*you have filled the world with woe too long! And you have taken undue liberties for ages* too long *without measure!"*

The helm of Theseus rang with his extemporaneous words. He felt a return of the thrill he'd had on first seeing it. The power coursed through him, imagined as he knew it to be . . . imagined as the sense of rightness he could feel streaming to him from the tiny building behind him, under the giant cedar. He held the bobbins of Clotho and Atropos tightly, keeping the tension in their threads, like bowstrings.

"This *then, you devious crones! Know that your time is short! Your days are numbered! Yes, they are numbered in seconds!"*

Atropos had stopped. She and Moira stared at him. Lachesis watched with a sober expression, eyes darting from him to her sisters and back.

But Clotho shifted her weight from foot to foot, apparently unamused and unimpressed. Her boredom was his end, he knew. There would be time for only a few more words.

Ah, goodbye, life. How sweet to die a hero!

*"Watch then, you degenerate and pathetic creatures of the past, as I, and all humanity, do curse your threads and, in so doing, seal your eventual doom!"*

He meant it merely for show. A handwave that might or might not be a potent curse. Superstitious he knew them to be, at some deep level. Otherwise they would not be caught up in all of this allegorical rigamarole. Perhaps he could leave them with an uncertainty . . . a faint, nagging doubt that might keep them company in their cold evenings.

He plucked a horsehair from his helmet, and held it out. He brought its tip against one of the taut threads and said: "There is an end to all things, ladies. And your time is certainly long overdue."

No one was more surprised than he when the tip of the horsehair erupted in flame. A slender column of actinic light appeared before Pavlos. It speared down from the sky to land with searing brilliance upon one of the threads.

The smell of ozone filled the air as the bolt of light hunted, wavered, then burned into the slender strand.

Atropos screamed, dropping her shears.



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Her nimbus ballooned outward in a violent display of pain. Within it, she whirled and capered and finally spun about to run headlong toward the supposed safety of the temple.

Pavlos suddenly felt a twang, as the Fury's life thread parted. Her aura erupted as she was halfway to her destination, sending an explosion of sparks into the air. When they had all fallen to Earth, Atropos was gone.

"Zeus!" Clotho bellowed. She dropped her pigments and clawed at the sky.

"You're dead!" she screamed. "I pulled you down myself! The Sky Tower is no more!"

The column of light hunted, then shifted toward the other thread, Clotho's.

"A little farther *south!*" Pavlos cried out. "Steady, you fumble-thumbs Yankee! Steady!"

Clotho howled as the pencil of brilliance struck its mark.

"You!" She pointed at Pavlos. "You knew of this! *This* is what you meant by 'planes' and your new science! You men have learned to fly like *gods,* and throw their lightning!"

The thread began to smoke. Pavlos felt a numbness take over him . . . a tremendous need to stand perfectly still.

"I'll fix this!" Clotho cried. She plucked her sister's shears from the ground. "I'll kill *billions* until I get those in your sky tower!"

She ran toward the loom, fire and death in her eyes.

And tripped on Moira's outstretched foot.

The pillar of light wavered, almost missing its target. The burning went on, but Clotho was apparently made of tougher substance than her sister. She scrabbled on the ground, towards him.

"How!" she hissed at him, as her aura began to show ugly discolorations. "How are you doing what the gods could not?"

Pavlos knew how he must look to her. The helm of Theseus might be appropriate for doing heroic deeds, but not for saying what he had to say to her. He removed it, being careful to keep his left hand, holding the bobbin, still.

"That's a very good question, and you deserve an answer.

"Deus ex Machina," he said, as blithely as he could. Then he strained against the tension and felt a snapping parting with the past.

## 8

". . . I thought you were delirious! Those random mutterings about



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*mythological women*, controlling mankind with magical *needles* and *thread*—"

"Of course, Frank. What else were you to think?" Pavlos held the microphone of the small transceiver close to his mouth. He rested with one elbow on the top step of the broad temple stylobate. He was relieved to find his American friend relatively calm. Only a small tremor in the voice from the tiny speaker gave clue to the shock he had experienced.

"Well, Pav, what was I to do? I was just about to call the police to get some search-and-rescue started when I realised it was sunrise, down there. So I took a chance and warmed up the spy-scope to take a look."

"And saw—"

"And saw a tapestry fifty feet or longer . . . with colors I'd *never* seen before! Shit. You were sitting there, those women standing around, then you touched that damned thing and something *happened* to me!"

Pavlos nodded. "So you decided to take a chance."

"Yeah. I mean, what the Hell, right? Everyone else up here was asleep. I figured what would it hurt to burn a thread?"

"I had no idea your experimental weapons were that good, Frank."

"Nor I! I wish to Heaven I could remember what I *did* to keep the beam tight and steady like that! Speaking of which, you did some pretty fine fire-control, helping me get that second witch. I almost had heart failure when the first one exploded like that!"

Pavlos laughed. It was good to know that Frank was going to be all right. An awful burden had fallen upon Pavlos, and he would need a friend with whom he could share it.

"Okay, Frank. Then there won't be any trouble at your end?"

"Trouble? What, *me* worry?" There was only a slight touch of hysteria in Frank's laughter. "Look, Pav, I gotta go. Talk to you later. The commander's up and he'll be wondering what I've been up to all night!" The carrier wave cut off with a subdued "click," but the astronaut's tinny laughter seemed to hang in the air.

Pavlos put down the microphone. He stretched back to rest his elbows on the granite platform and allowed the sunshine to do its work upon him.

The loom was a few feet away. Lachesis sat in her accustomed chair, once again making a blur of her hands as she shuttled five billion bobbins in intricate patterns through the warp of the tapestry. The rhythmic pumping of the foot pedal sounded like a heartbeat. There was a hint of a smile on her parched, ancient face, and



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once again she seemed oblivious to everything but her Art.

Out on the lawn two seared, brown patches stood out against the green. Beyond them he saw Moira leaving the Gateway shrine, carrying a covered basket.

She mounted the wide steps of the portico, a distant expression of bemusement on her face.

"They're still coming through," she said. "I'm not as nimble as Clotho was, so a fair number of the newborn threads escaped. That was what we had agreed to allow soon, anyway."

Pavlos nodded. "I've been thinking about it, and I've come to believe you're right. Starting off letting a few percent run wild—that would be a fair experiment. If we humans have learned to use the Spark properly . . . maybe even well enough to dispense with the threads altogether . . . then those children will show it soon enough."

"And if not?"

Pavlos shrugged. He couldn't help glancing at Lachesis.

The crone had dropped her bobbins and now held Atropos' shears. The clicking sound of lifelines parting went on for a moment, then she sat back and examined. The ghost of a smile returned. She went back to work, weaving.

"We could have taken this thing no farther if we tried," Moira assured him. "Lachesis is less fragile than Atropos and Clotho. I doubt it is within the realm of man or god to thwart her. Indeed, this whole affair came about, probably, because she finally tired of Clotho's garish, unnatural colors, and Atropos's meddling. In the last fifty years she has been forcing Atropos to allow the lifespan to increase. This may be what she was leading up to.

"I doubt very much if she'll let me wash Clotho's dyes out of the bobbins already in place. There will have to be a transition, or the tapestry will be disjointed—something she will never allow.

"But I will try to clean a few of the uglier threads, or snip them. She won't mind that. And from this day forth the new threads will wear their natural colors . . . for well or ill."

Moira looked Pavlos in the eyes.

"You know how hard this is, to forswear all but the smallest interference? I am an old goddess, and I will find it hard to change. Even *you* may find yourself tempted to go too far, when you start feeling more and more of your power as a god."

Pavlos felt a moment's irritation. They had disagreed about this earlier.

"I'm not a god, I tell you. Stop saying that!"

She smiled, and touched his arm lightly.



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"Not a hero, then not a god? Pavlos Apropoulos, you did not hear yourself, perhaps, when you cursed my sisters and called down thunderbolts?"

"I *told* you, those were—"

" 'Laser' bolts instead, yes. And your friend, who is also only a man, managed to overcome all of the safeguards on that secret weapon in his sky tower, *and* his doubts on hearing your weird tale through that talking box—"

"Radio."

"And you do not think these are acts of gods?"

Pavlos shrugged. Moira made him uncomfortable. There were too many things to think about . . . things that would take time and open air to consider . . . a desert somewhere, or a mountaintop.

"By the way," Moira interrupted his train of thought. Her tone was no longer imperious, but that of one speaking to a younger peer. "You should know that your presence will be required here in a year's time, when the summer solstice comes."

Pavlos looked at her. Somehow she had made her appearance softer. She must have taken the time to comb and braid her hair properly. In her hand, the basket throbbed with the healthy kicking of a hundred thousand newly sparked, undyed threads. She cradled the basket, smiling happily.

"Why that day, in particular?" Pavlos asked.

Her smile widened.

"Because today's events made it clear to me that the One still exists, and has finally intervened again. I decided, therefore, to make peace.

"On that day, an emissary will come through the Gateway. It will be only for a visit," she soothed. "So you needn't fear any more meddling.

"I merely wanted you here so that Prometheus could see how big, strong, and handsome his son had grown."

Pavlos was astonished to find himself blushing. He looked down at his feet while, a few meters away, Lachesis worked her pedals and wove her bobbins, and the air carried the sounds of a new pattern forming.



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# LETTERS

*The only way we can keep the letter column interesting is for us to have interesting letters to publish. And the only way . . . so, please send us your letters. Send them to the editorial offices, at Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101. (We also send out our sheet on manuscript format and story requirements from that address. When asking for these, please include an envelope, about 9¼ inches long, addressed to yourself, with adequate postage affixed.) Subscription matters—renewals, changes of address, and the like, go to an entirely different address: Box 1933, Marion OH 43305. Anything that doesn't fit into either editorial or subscription departments can go to the publisher's address: 380 Lexington Ave., New York NY 10017.*

*Any magazine editor lives in the future: we're writing these words on the 11th of June 1981, but we're talking to you up there in November, when you've already been through the summer we're not yet into . . . and since this is a science-fiction magazine, we can't help but imagine, sometimes, what it would be like if you—in November—could let us—back here in June—know what's going on then. That—perhaps—is how Dickens's time travel story started.*

*—George H. Scithers*

Mister Scithers,

There was once a fan who purchased the Oct. 1980 issue of *IA'sfm*—having already devoured the 31 issues that preceded it, and being anxious for more—and upon reading, came upon a curious (and large) story called *Peregrine: Perplexed,* by Avram Davidson. The story was unlike any other previously presented within those pages (well, most of the stories were unlike etc., etc., but this piece was even more so) in that it spake in a very unusual style, with phrases nested within phrases, and resulting in incredibly long sentences. Try as he might, the fan found himself unable to read more than a few pages before finding himself lost, and he set the magazine aside (perhaps to finish it in better days), all the time thinking, *this is not the way my 6th-grade English teacher said one should write.*

The months passed and new issues of *IA'sfm* were purchased and devoured; but the sad Oct. 1980 issue remained, unfinished, on the shelf. At last came the issues with letters concerning that curious story (in which outrage was cried that such writing should ever see print within that magazine) and the fan glowed with fiendish pleas-



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ure as he read, screaming out, "Get him again!" or, "Give the scoundrel what he deserves!"

Nevertheless, there were a few malcontents that could not follow the crowd by insulting the story (they praised it, in fact), and this disturbed the fan, haunting him wherever he would go, and whatever he would do.

Finally, the fan had had enough. "Enough!" he cried. "I shall give the story another chance, reading carefully and slowly, and *then* I shall be justified in condemning it!"

Choosing a quiet location and a large block of spare time, (two items nearly as mythical as certain devices in the story itself) he sat down and began to read, finding it quite difficult at first (rather like getting water in one's nose and eyes while learning to swim), but (like swimming) delightfully worth the initial discomfort. Indeed, the story's unusual style served to support much of the subtle humor contained therein.

The fan then wrote a letter humbly begging the forgiveness of both author and editor for his earlier (although unexpressed) doubts concerning their competence, but also begging that such radical departures from editorial policy be accompanied in the future by a short explanation (of what is going on here) in the story's opening blurb. Nevertheless, the story was (eventually) much appreciated.

Thy faithful servant,

Wes Brzozowski
337 Janice Street.
Endicott NY 13760

*I don't say that everyone will see the good in it upon re-reading, but surely some will, and I imagine that Avram will rejoice more in one lost sheep that was found than in ninety-and-nine that went not astray.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Isaac,

I'm afraid all of this is quickly losing its freshness. This turn of events described as "Science Fiction counter-culture being drawn into official policy" by Greg Benford is what I'm talking about. It seems every page I flip praises the intense scientific and engineering background of authors like yourself or de Camp or Pournelle or etc. . . . And how true to life it all is. That's the point. Science fiction of old wasn't written by nuclear eggheads but by free-spirited vi-



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sionairies. That's what gave it that breath of fresh air, of escape and hope for a brighter future. Your brand of Scifi has become clinical like a hospital-scented medical reference book. Blessed are guys like Varley who didn't get caught up in technical details of Dick and Dickson megaton detail. Now, everytime I read a list of credits Hogan's long, I'm tempted to shut the book and read Star Trek. Stop discrediting true poets for their lack of degrees in biophysics and dissecting presumptions and ifs! Do us all a favor and bring back the good old "Outer Limits" shrieking stuff that made our flesh crawl and our emotions stand on edge. I don't care if the author is a graduate of M.I.T. or spent three years at Palomar. That doesn't make for good writing. Actually, ignorance makes for better energy and style. Robert Howard, Verne and Wells never heard of quarks and spins and mesons. Paul French's Lucky Star is more exciting than the Foundation Trilogy. I made my point. Give the young writers an even break. Don't make them believe they have to become live computers to write a good story. Scientists belong in laboratories and authors in studio attics. That's the way it's always been and probably always will be.

Sincerely,

Tony Cherleer

*You are quite wrong, I'm afraid. The founders of science fiction: E. A. Poe, J. Verne, H. G. Wells, were well-founded in science. Verne, in particular, had his stories sound like lectures in many places. The early science-fiction writers for the magazines—the best regarded of them—were scientists. E.E. Smith was a chemist with a Ph.D.; J. W. Campbell was a physicist. Stories might well be full of action; that doesn't make them bad if whatever science they contain is reasonably accurate. Don't think you have to be a scientific illiterate to write good action stories. Paul French filled his Lucky Starr stories with (for the times) accurate astronomy.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear George,

How could you let such a glaring error find its way into print? In your June 8 issue, the story "Speaking To Others . . ." by Leigh Kennedy, referred to its harmonic aliens as Cassiopeians. Jarring. Even I know that Cassiopeia is a constellation composed of several stars, named after a mythological queen, and viewed as a group from Earth. Even if the aliens were named by their discoverers, they



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would be labeled according to their local star and not by the name of the entire group of stars which compose the constellation. Don't you think that this point is worth mentioning to us beginning writers?

J.C. Wright
240 Brookside Dr.
Ann Arbor MI 48105

P.S. I really am a fan of yours, Shawna's, and most especially the Good Doctor's or I wouldn't be moved by frustration to write.

*You're right and yet there's a precedent right here on Earth. Natives of the U.S.A. call themselves Americans to the annoyance of Canadians, Mexicans, Brazilians, and so on; and yet we don't really expect them to be called Unitedstatesians.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers,

In the November issue of *IA'sfm,* you published an Improbable Bestiary poem of F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre. Then in January you started featuring them regularly. As I read through them, I thought they were pretty good and humorous. But then, in the May 11 issue, the poem was not a humorous one, but a serious poem explaining possible thoughts of the Loch Ness monster. I think you should publish more of this nature in the future.

David Koch
Marine City MI

*Personally, I'd be inclined to publish* any *light verse old FGM might put out, but I'm not the final judge in such things, you understand. Good old George is. (And he just rejected a short-short of mine, so what does* he *know?)*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers,

After having been delighted and impressed with the job you've done with *IA'sfm,* I finally have something to add.

Your response to the letters from the blind woman and her daughter would have been more valuable if you'd plugged the Library of Congress's recordings program; it always needs readers, of which SF has an abundance, and it always needs mentioning, since I imag-



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ine that many people don't know about it, depriving many potential beneficiaries.

And, as long as I'm writing anyway, congratulations and thanks for establishing the first new science fiction magazine to succeed in a generation.

SMI²LE,

Neil Rest
Chicago IL

*I am delighted to plug it.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Sirs:

On the whole, I think your June 8th issue was excellent. I enjoyed almost everything you put between the covers.

But one thing I certainly did not enjoy was the cover itself. In fact, I haven't liked any of the three covers you've had since you've begun your "new design." The new logo is fine, but the paintings have been, without exception, awful. They're fine as *paintings,* but they're lousy compared to what I've come to expect from you. (And your companion magazine *Analog* has also suffered.)

But inside, everything is wonderful. The features were up to your usual standards. The interior artwork was excellent (fantastic, if you compare it to the cover). And the stories were all good, with a few among the best you've published so far this year.

"The Portrait of Baron Negay" was particularly interesting, since I remembered the excerpt in Barry B. Longyear's book on SF writing. It was very good, particularly on the technical side of painting. One of the best by him that you've published so far.

"Wind Instrument" was almost as good, and again handled the technical background very well. Another great story.

The rest of the stories were all excellent, even the "Son of ETAOIN SHRDLU" thing. "Bitch on the Bull Run" was a bit better and a bit funnier than most of the rest of the series, even though I once heard the final joke on the TV show "M*A*S*H (and it's probably older than that). On the whole, an excellent issue, even though the cover was lousy.

If only you could hire someone like Tomasi to paint your covers. That way, you could get covers and interior illustrations that look like famous artists work (SF and otherwise), without paying what the real artists would want.



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Robert Nowall
2730 SE 24th Place
Cape Coral FL 33904

*If the illustrations are fine paintings, I can't help but think that that is all to the good. Don't tell me it's* rotten *paintings you want.*
*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov:

The majority of your magazine articles are good, and I enjoy them. The exceptions are slowly but surely creeping in—for example, who cares if an author inadvertantly uses "galaxy" to describe the origin of an entity foreign to Earth (June 8, 1981)?

Should I desire to differentiate between "possible" and "feasible" (June 8, 1981), there are many sources other than your magazine available to readers such as myself, who are apparently classed as intellectual misfits.

Why not publish one "reject" article each month, and allow the reader to determine the fate of the authors, instead of publishing a doctorial thesis on the proper usage of words.

We need more of the *Chessmen of Mars* and less intellectual persiflage. Why risk the possibilities of the Surgeon General, OSHA, *et al.* forcing you to place a warning label on an otherwise good magazine?

Bring back "Buck Rogers" and let the south sides of northbound horses wallow in their intellect while we enjoy a respite from our daily routines.

V.R. Sahlin
Normal IL

*Well,* I *care, sir, and there would be no possible value in being editorial director if I couldn't please myself in such matters.*
*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers, Ms. McCarthy, and Dr. Asimov:

Several comments on your May 11, 1981 issue:

About the letter from Mrs. Roger Lewis who was not renewing her subscription due to her disagreement with a recent cover: Hooray for Isaac! I am looking at that cover as I write, and I see nothing offensive about it. I am often astounded at Christians who seem to



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feel that the body (especially the female body) is inherently sinful; and that any reference to or thought of sex is abominable. I only feel sorry for any children she may have. By the way, I was fascinated with "Light on the Sound," the story on which the picture was based.

On to happier things!

Less than a week before I received this issue (May 11, 1981), I was thinking that what was really needed was a story about science fiction and mental health services. And then I found two such stories right in that issue. I read both of them with great pleasure.

I was especially moved by "Other Wells, Other Saints" by Scott Elliot Marbach. I work in an institution for the developmentally disabled (mentally retarded) now. Mr. Marbach's picture of one of the former residents of such an institution made me sad and happy in a way impossible to explain. Thank you for that story.

"Bridges" by Sharon Webb was also a beautiful and thought-provoking story. Since I am a practicing music therapist, though, I feel compelled to defend my profession—or at least see that it is recognized. When the nurse in the story works with Clara, her patient, to try to get her to communicate through singing, she is using music-therapy, rather than speech-therapy techniques. Or, to be fair, music-therapy and speech-therapy techniques combined. There are thousands of Registered Music Therapists working in hospitals, nursing homes, developmental schools, and mental institutions throughout the country, using music to improve their clients' lives and living skills. Music therapy, in one of its facets, makes use of the fact that speech and singing come from different parts of the brain in helping brain-damaged children and adults. I just couldn't let this oblique reference to music therapy go by unnoticed.

Again, thank you for your great magazine, and the great stories. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Colleen Cart Blythe, RMT
607 Pond Court #222
Orlando FL 32808

*It always bothers me when SF is thought of as primarily "escapist." Here we have evidence that it touches very real concerns and very moving ones.*

*—Isaac Asimov*



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Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am a new subscriber to your magazine (since February '81), and after reading your February and April issues I felt I had to write and express my opinion of your magazine. I am highly impressed, no, I am ecstatic with the quality of your magazine and of its stories. Gentlemen, you have restored my faith in SF mags, which was destroyed by some of the trash we have been getting lately, but your magazine puts them in their proper place.

I particularly enjoyed "Unicorn Variation" by Roger Zelazny and "The House of If" by Barry Longyear. Somtow Sucharitkul also impressed me with his work in February's edition.

The only criticism I can possibly air is against the lack of color illustrations between the covers. It seems to me that the stories you publish certainly merit this small consideration. I fervently hope that subsequent issues of your magazine are as evidently superior as these two were. If they are (as I believe they will be) I shall be eagerly looking forward to many, many years of superior SF reading.

Again I thank you for restoring my faith and giving me the pleasure of reading your magazine.

Sincerely,

Michael Steen
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

*Ah, if you but knew what it would cost to put color inside the magazine and what would happen to the price!*

*—Isaac Asimov*

NEXT ISSUE

For those of you who said that the only thing wrong with the Robert Silverberg story in our May 11, 1981 issue was that it was too short, we've got a treat in store. The December 21, 1981 issue of IA'sfm will offer "A Thief in Ni-Moya," a new Silverbergian tale of his wonderous planet Majipoor In addition, we'll have stories, articles, and other . . . things from such people as Avram Davidson, Lee Killough, Brian Aldiss, and F. M. Busby. On Sale November 24, 1981.

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**We allow you at least 10 days** for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

**As a member you need take only 4** Selections or Alternates during the coming year. You may resign any time thereafter, or remain a member as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $2.98. Other Selections are slightly higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now. Cut off this postage-paid reply card and mail today!

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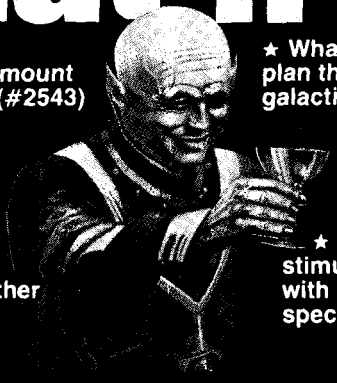

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